

Unveiling Assumptions: Photography, Word Politics, and the *Hijab*

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Geopolitical events shape the lenses through which we view the world around us. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the World Trade Center attacks of 11 September 2001, the Western world has observed the Middle East, and particularly the Islamic religion, with increasing distrust, disapproval, and fear. This ongoing shift in cultural and religious identifications is accompanied by the appropriation of foreign cultural and religious symbols, specifically the *hijab*. Theoretically grounded in the works of Edward Said, Sharon Crowley, and John Berger, this essay examines the hegemonic discourses that inform photographic representations of the *hijab* and considers how photography could instead inspire purposeful conversations and the positive negotiation of differences.

In the fall of 2005, Dr. Stephen Croucher of Bowling Green State University conducted a series of interviews with French Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in order to analyze deculturalization, assimilation, and host culture receptivity, specifically as these themes related to the Muslim female's donning of the *hijab*, the Islamic scarf that covers the head and chest. Croucher's interviews were prompted by French Law 228, which prohibited the display of "conspicuous signs" of religious association in public schools. "Conspicuous signs" were defined as "a large cross, a veil, or a skullcap" (qtd. in Scott 1). While also applicable to Jewish and Sikh boys who wore traditional religious dress, the law was primarily intended to curb the rights of Muslim girls who were wearing *hijab* in public schools (Scott 1). One of Croucher's interview participants, a retired public schoolteacher named Melinda, shared her overwhelming support for the ban: "Before the ban . . . it was hard for teacher [*sic*] to control . . . the problem of Muslims and the veils. The ban gives teachers . . . protection in the classroom" (Croucher 107). Three words in Melinda's statement warrant scrutiny: *problem*, *control*, and *protection*. These words, although products of an individual person (Melinda) in a single city (Bordeaux) in a lone country (France), nonetheless epitomize an entire philosophy, one that was born in the colonizing countries of Europe but has recently found a home across the Atlantic in our own country. This philosophy views the *hijab* as a threatening symbol of the "Other," its presence almost exclusively associated with the violent and misogynistic notions of Islam that have been disseminated throughout the Western world via radio, air, and cyber waves since the kindling of the Iranian Revolution on 4 November 1979, and which achieved their zenith following the World Trade Center attacks of 11 September 2001.

One consequence of this life-altering event was the unmitigated explosion of a fear of Islam. Characterized as a terrorist training camp, for more than twelve years the faith has predominantly been viewed by the Western world as a "problem" that we must "control" in order to guarantee our own safety and "protection." The global war on terror of the George W. Bush administration has been distorted into a Western attack on Islam, in which the *hijab* serves as the ominous mark of religious zealotry. The assumption and propagation of an ethnocentric viewpoint that replaces historical and sociopolitical complexities with easy and generic associations of religious terror is, unfortunately, nothing new. But the particularity of this deconstruction and its accompanying con-

notative transfer of meaning, which has subsequently politicized the headscarf as a symbol of *jihad* in its colloquial sense, *is* new—and it is both fascinating and terrifying.

This essay argues that the appropriation of meaning that has resulted in the politicization of the *hijab* is the result of a hegemonic discourse that was born out of a time of crisis. Chantal Mouffe and Ernst Laclau have defined hegemony as “the achievement of a moral, intellectual and political leadership through the expansion of a discourse that partially fixes meaning around nodal points” (qtd. in Crowley 5). According to rhetorician Sharon Crowley, “Hegemonic discourses construct and inform community experience to such an extent that their assumptions seem natural, ‘just the way things are’” (12). Crowley asserts that hegemonic discourses are also often fundamentalisms, or “foundations [that] are held to be primary, noncontingent, and nonnegotiable” (14). Borrowing theories of cultural hegemony and exteriority from literary theorist Edward Said’s 1978 opus *Orientalism*, I will examine the fundamentalist associations linking the *hijab* and threat through a heuristic exploration of the complex relationships of power and identity between the Eastern Islamic nations and the Western Christian hemisphere. In Said’s view, much like Crowley’s, hegemony is maintained through an act of discourse: the separatist act of solidifying cultural definitions of the “Other” (with the role of “Other” here specifically assumed by the Orient). In other words, the “we,” or the West or Occident, continually underscores the inferiority of the “not-we,” or Orient, by locating itself in the position of informed outsider who defines the Orient in opposition to its revered self (7). The West therefore places itself in the role of judicial seer and the Orient in the position of object-to-be-seen-and-judged.

We can localize and familiarize these abstruse characterizations by considering the relationship between the modern Web surfer and the photographs that populate an online image search. As the images fill the computer screen, the Web navigator is inundated with what she assumes to be merely meaningless visual spectacle—what art critic John Berger describes as “information severed from all lived experience” (56). In this severed state, the photographs’ subjects are deprived of the ability to determine their own meaning, and consequently assume the same object-to-be-seen-and-judged status as the Orient. To rediscover meaning, the Web surfer, like the West, appropriates the subject and files it into an easy category of definition. In this manner, the photograph serves as both a metaphor and a discursive tool for Orientalism.

In order to further examine the everyday practice of Orientalism, this article delves into the complex relationship between the captured image of the photograph, particularly a female Islamic image, and the Western photographer and audience. Specifically, it argues that photography has played a major role in both bolstering and complicating the cognitive relations between *hijab* and oppression and between *hijab* and terror. Drawing on popular online images of the *hijab*, it analyzes the definitive claims that are being made about Islamic dress and Islamic women through photography. As photography has assisted in the dehumanization of the Islamic female, it can also aid in asserting her legitimacy as subject by taking an “antifoundationalist” stance: “critique[ing] . . . belief systems that posit universal or noncontingent foundations” and urging “contingency and inclusion over certainty and exclusion” (Crowley 13). Crowley notes that any successful antifoundationalist rhetorical argument must appeal not only to reason, the historic champion of rhetoric, but also to emotion, its historically derided associate, as the two “are mutually dependent and mutually constructive” (48). Antifoundationalism will herein be explored through the application of John Berger’s “alternative photography,” which expresses the goal of “incorporat[ing] photography into social and political memory” (62). Berger argues that this is possible by creating meaningful and holistic context, or constructing a “radial system” of memory “around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic” (62, 64, 67). My argument supports Berger’s radial system, but respectfully submits as necessary additions the symbolic, sexual, and psychological, the religious and cul-

tural, the critical and ethical, and the ethnic and racial. The final goal of this essay, then, is to consider how alternative photography may be employed to subvert or diminish the primacy of Orientalism by encouraging antifoundationalist rhetoric.

Political Memory

Said would argue that the deconstruction of Islam and transference of meaning to the *hijab* is merely the latest in a series of Orientalist events in which the West has employed the tools of simplification and symbolization toward the East, “authorizing views of it, describing it, . . . teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” in order to maintain hegemony (*Orientalism* 3). The hegemony in question is not principally militaristic, but rather psychological and political. According to Said, “Orientalism . . . is . . . a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (*Orientalism* 12). Within Orientalism, understanding is often approached through a process of simplification, equating the foreign with the comfortable, the convenient, and the socially or historically familiar. In times of crisis, however, the West identifies the Orient as the enemy. For instance, the 4 November 1979 student-led attack against the U.S. Embassy in Teheran was seen by Americans as an unprovoked act of terror against innocents. This interpretation denies the possibility that the act was a symbolic response against diplomats of a country whose offer of refuge to a violent despot prevented his people from attaining justice against his tyrannical rule. Similarly, the incidents of 11 September 2001 are often viewed not as isolated aggressions headed by a notoriously militant and fundamentalist political regime (one with roots stemming from CIA support of the Mujahedeen in the Soviet-Afghan War), but as the culmination of an entire world region’s wish to destroy America (Blight et al. 66, 228). In the same way, sundry Western nations currently interpret the *hijab* as a symbol of female repression, primitivism, and religion-based terror, rather than as a garment establishing sacred space, privacy within a public sphere, or sexual modesty.

The ubiquity of Western analysis of the Orient is commensurate with the level of discomfort the West feels toward the Orient at any given moment. As fears increase, the use of oppositional terms becomes quotidian and perfunctory: words like “threat,” “terror,” and “oppression” pepper the public news feeds and dinner party conversations concerning Islam in general and the headscarf in particular. Just as the Iranian Revolution delivered the unintended consequence of a Western separatist and nationalistic rhetoric, 9/11 has encouraged a movement that seeks to reclaim Occidental agency through hegemonic discourse.

Historic and Economic Memory

In *Covering Islam*, Said’s exegesis of media depictions of Islam following the embassy hostage crisis in Iran, he notes, “Whenever in modern times an acutely political tension has been felt between the Occident and *its* Orient (or between the West and *its* Islam), there has been a tendency in the West to resort not to direct violence but first to the cool, relatively detached instruments of scientific, quasi-objective representation” (24). Thus, the act of *re*-presentation occurs, in part, as the result of previous images and beliefs concerning the Orient proving invalid or insufficient. Just as *our* technologically progressive Iran under Shah Reza Pahlavi was forever lost after the 1979 uprising, *our* oil-rich and occasionally abrasive but manageable Middle East was replaced by the image of two planes crashing into the Twin Towers. Following these events, news images of an angry Ayatollah Khomeini and a dangerously seductive Osama bin Laden were often juxtaposed with camera shots of Muslim women clad in *hijab* in the streets of Teheran or Kabul, constructing a perhaps unintended framework in which the second image is equated to the first.

Indeed, the photograph has proven itself a commanding weapon in the war on terror. Concerning representations of the *hijab*, the photograph has predominantly served to deny the par-

ticularity of the veiled Islamic woman, instead enforcing its notion of her as both victim and terrorist through a process of what Anne Frances Wysocki terms “aesthetic formalizing” (168), a psychological distancing effect whereby the viewer estranges the photographic subject in order to judge or imprint aesthetic form.

Symbolic, Psychological, and Sexual Memory

The effect of aesthetic formalizing within this photographic context is to objectify the female Islamic body even as it neutralizes the dominating power of the headscarf. Before reviewing examples of such photographs, it is necessary to discuss this power in all its complexity. While the *hijab* serves very specific religious and marital purposes within the culture of Islam (which will be discussed later in this essay), the West, having no familiarity with the cultural implications of the headscarf, views it as an obstruction—a hostile refusal to participate in normative communicative processes. These processes happen to require strict adherence to accepted gendered and sexualized identities. Psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco has stated that “the real problem posed by the veil is that it covers over a sexual dimension. It denies the equality between men and women upon which our society rests” (qtd. in Scott 157). As Joan Scott deftly asserts, this view assumes that equality is founded on an appreciation of sexual difference. It follows, then, that the male gaze, which transmits appreciation of the female form as sexual object, confers feminine identity to the gazer’s object (158). The gaze is thus a communicative act, naming the female as sexual Other. Roudinesco argues that the sexual gaze is a necessary step for gender equality. As such, her notion of equality is illegitimate, as it is founded on an act that inherently privileges the gazer, providing him with the tools of definition.¹

The *hijab* therefore threatens the status quo of Western society, as it denies manhood the privilege of determining identifications. The act of naming is an important step in understanding one’s place in the world—or rather, of crafting a world in relation to the self. Man’s ability to establish nominal representations of Other has historically solidified his intellectual and social superiority. In the current era, man continues to assert his agency through rhetorical means. The Occident establishes superiority through its oppositional representation of the Orient, just as, on a universal rather than a particular level, man’s agency over woman is legitimized through his gaze, a gaze that qualifies her potential according to her ability to act as object of his sexual gratification.

The admission of this structured voyeurism would approach blasphemy in a purely Western and non-Muslim social setting, as gendered and sexual communicative processes have become so ingrained within our culture that their existence is tacitly ignored and even denied; however, the presence of *hijab* necessitates the admission, as it frustrates the sexual gaze and prohibits communication as we know it. This frustration is viewed as an act of violence, as it emasculates the male, depriving him of his “natural” right to gaze at the sexualized female body beneath the *hijab* (Scott 159). This, in turn, privileges the *hijabi*, as she retains her ability to communicate—her ability to gaze. Indeed, the gaze through the *hijab* is one of increased focus, as the receptor of the gaze is not distracted by the physicality of the gazer. Thus, flipping Orientalism on its head, the receptor assumes an “object-to-be-seen” status; and, as if through the “eye of a camera,” the gaze of the *hijabi* is “like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything” (Alloula 14).

Dramatic Memory

This shift in normative agency is the primary catalyst for the fear of the *hijab*, for its assumed status as a marker of terrorism, and for the urges to “control” and “protect” that Melinda felt in her classroom when faced with young girls dressed in *hijab*. Alternatively, this same communicative process has the ability to inspire either a patronized sympathy toward the *hijabi* (as the woman whose husband/brother/father/uncle/alternative male relative denies her the ability to receive the

gaze of the Western male) or a hostile rebuke (as the woman who passively promotes atavism). In any case, the *hijab* has acquired a set of distinctly political associations, all of which urge the removal of the headscarf for the sake of Western rhetorical comfort. It should be noted that Western assumptions of the headscarf as a symbol of authority are not necessarily shared by all Islamic communities, specifically fundamentalist communities. Fundamentalists are an assembly of Islamic reactionaries who fear secularization as an endangerment to the sacred teachings of Islam. Members of this group view Islam as having been incorrectly interpreted by practitioners of the faith who attempt to modernize the texts in order to practice “culturally mediated forms of Islam” (Woodlock 405). Said argues that these communities also engage in the rhetorical packing of Islam, too often legitimizing “the abrogation of personal freedoms . . . with reference to Islam,” which he declares “is doctrinally as blameless in this regard as any other of the great universal religions” (*Covering Islam* xvi).

However, Said argues that the West is partially responsible for the stringent belief system of fundamentalist Islam and its rapid spread throughout the Middle East. Social actions, much like physical motion, necessitate equal and opposite reactions. Therefore, through the process of a double-turn, Western rhetorical attempts to define Islam have in a sense propagated fundamentalist Islamic responses that frequently claim the West as narcissistic and controlling. Said identifies this call-and-response discussion as “word politics . . . the opening of certain rhetorical spaces and the closing of others . . . by which each side sets up situations, justifies actions, forecloses options, and presses alternatives on the other” (*Covering Islam* xvi).

Word politics are marked by a blatant denial that the antagonist’s rhetorical arguments have any potential validity. The reason for this is that both parties in the discussion embrace their belief systems as foundational. Consequently, any person or party whose existence does not reinforce the dominant belief system is considered insignificant. In Crowley’s words, “Belief systems that take a given starting point as universal must also assume that any being whose subjectivity is not legitimated by that starting point is of secondary or lesser worth” (13). Both Orientalist and fundamentalist Islamic stances are rigidly universal. Therefore, word politics between the West and fundamentalist Islamic political movements inevitably result in misunderstandings that only serve to increase tensions between the two.

Critical and Ethical Memory

We now turn to word politics as they exist within the sphere of photography. As previously stated, photographic images of the Muslim woman have chiefly de-particularized their subject. In doing so, the photograph has provided the West the opportunity to proclaim its superiority in relation to the Orient by asserting authority over the *hijabi*. This action effectively restores the male viewer’s masculinity by reinstating the *hijabi*’s female identity through her sexuality, metaphorically unveiling her by relegating her to the status of gazer’s object or spectacle. According to John Berger, modern “opportunism turns everything—nature, history, suffering, other people, catastrophes, sport, sex, politics—into spectacle” through the conduit of the camera (58–59). Examining the connotative messages of the photograph and their promotion of the subject as object/spectacle is necessary in order to disrupt the back-and-forth game of word politics as it currently stands, and instead offer alternatives in photographic representation that would mitigate misunderstanding and distrust arising from cultural and racial difference. In this manner, photography can have the effect of promoting positive curiosity, using reason and emotion to encourage pronouncements of legitimacy and respect toward the Other. These outcomes can be reached by embracing antifoundationalist methods that engage the predisposed human qualities of inquisitiveness and care.

These methods are hereafter introduced in relation to a selection of five photographs that depict Islamic *hijabi*. The photographs are all accessible online and are relatively recent, the old-

est dating to 2008. As the World Wide Web has introduced an expansive platform in which rhetorical combat is as easy as the click of a mouse, the pictures present the sometimes vituperative back-and-forth game of word politics on a global scale. The images represent Western audiences' attempts to simplify and objectify a foreign subject through aesthetic formalizing, in addition to Islamic females' efforts to combat this dangerous process of easy categorization. We will begin by describing each photograph and then analyzing it for the foundationalist rhetoric it may or may not promote. This process challenges the primacy of Orientalist tendencies of representation and promotes the restoration of humanity to the photographed subject.

The first image we will discuss is a photograph presented by the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), a German-based nonprofit that identifies itself as a "civil society organisation . . . [that] . . . supports people, who fight for the implementation of human rights in their countries by non-violent means or people who are persecuted because they demand their rights."² The photograph presents the image of a presumably Middle Eastern woman wearing a *niqab*, which is an Islamic veil that covers the face in addition to the head and chest. The *niqab* leaves an oval opening through which the eyes can be seen. Vertical bars are shown on the subject's *niqab*, characterizing it as a symbolic prison. The female in this photograph assumes an Everywoman character, signifying the hardships faced by all Muslim women everywhere. Similarly, her *niqab* acts as a symbol of Islamic religion and culture as a whole, so that the ISHR is denouncing particularities, such as Egyptian Sunni and Iranian Shia religions and cultures, indiscriminately. A message at the bottom of the photograph further contributes to generalities in lieu of specifics, commanding the reader to "stop the oppression of women." This is not to say the oppression of Islamic women who partake in the tradition of wearing the headscarf, but rather the oppression of all women populating what ISHR refers to as "the Islamic world." "The Islamic world" could be interpreted as any and all nations predominantly populated by people who have chosen to practice their faith within the Muslim religion. This includes nations with historical Taliban political authority like Afghanistan and also the democratic country Turkey and close Western political ally and autocratically ruled Saudi Arabia.

The woman represented in the photograph is introduced to the audience not as an individual but rather as an abstraction. Using her body as a canvas for its message, ISHR has objectified the woman through aesthetic formalizing. The forms of well-lined human eyes, shapely brows, and tanned skin imprisoned behind upright rusting bars, all encircled by a navy veil existing in blank space, are visually pleasing. The variations of lines and light in the photograph, the mirroring of the scarf's aperture with the open eye, and the central placement of the incarcerated eyes adhere to typically celebrated design principles. These qualities of beauty in design act as physical enticements to the female beneath the veil, in the same way that European colonial artists have historically portrayed the veil as a symbol of sensuality.

According to Claudia Koonz, the Muslim veil has served for the Western colonialist as the mark of the "harem," or coquettishly denied sexuality, awaiting the appearance of the virile male who will release the untapped resources of its owner (176). The construct of the harem is further discussed in Malek Alloula's *Colonial Harem*. Alloula examines French colonial postcards from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that reflect predominantly sexualized characterizations of veiled Algerian women. Alloula argues that these postcards inspire the ubiquitous "propagation of the phantasm of the harem by means of photography" (4). The postcards Alloula references portray the harem as a prison, its bars establishing a physical barrier between the Western male and his object of sexual interest, as well as an ideology of the Islamic woman as caged victim. The ISHR image reproduces these same qualities, as the female in this picture is confined from the viewer not only by the bars within her *niqab* but also by the medium of the photograph itself. In this example, the marriage of image and text effaces the potential for reciprocal communication

and understanding through the absence of particularity and the establishment of sexual identification. The subject's communicative agency is thus denied, even as the dominant male gaze is restored.

The ISHR photograph creates a rhetoric of difference by abstracting the female body and denying the presence of the human subject. Using the image of the *niqab* to symbolize Islamic womanhood specifically and religion and cultures of the Middle East in general, the ISHR has constructed a notion of the Orient that is derived from what Said refers to as a "premise . . . [of] exteriority." In this manner, the product of ISHR's work "is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside [and superior to] the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (*Orientalism* 21). Similarly, the photograph's viewers are intended to react with a specific set of predetermined core emotions (outrage, disgust, and pity, among others), all of which stem from a seat of disapproving Otherness.

Another image, which accompanied the *New York Times* 5 June 2009, article "What Not to Wear, Baghdad-Style: Fashion Rules Begin to Change," reinforces the Western play of word politics by bolstering the notion of the head scarf as the ultimate representation of threatening strangeness.³ The photograph is composed of two side-by-side images. The first shows sixteen-year-old Iraqi model Riam Salaam Sabri clad in traditional black *hijab*, while the second offers a view of Sabri in a casual, feminine-cut T-shirt. The shirt is imprinted with a graphic that encapsulates a Western brand of femininity: two cartoon women clad in short pink dresses resembling 1960s flight attendant uniforms, sporting black high heels and blonde hairdos, walking a toy-breed dog. If viewed separately from one another, the two photographs do little more than capture fleeting forms. And yet, when juxtaposed they acquire the recognizable structure of the "before and after" pictographic fashion narrative. In this image, then, the Oriental *hijabi* has been even more overtly identified as a human of lesser form than her Western counterpart. Relying on American familiarity with the modern cultural trope of the fashion makeover and its unquestioned ability to unmask a "better you," the *New York Times* column writers and photographer make evident the supposed inferiority of the Islamic woman and the Islamic brand of femininity. The supporting text states, "Riam Salaam Sabri, 16, wore more conservative clothing while security in Baghdad was poor, but now she feels safe in Western clothes" (Williams and Mohammed). The photographer and authors thus mitigate any remaining ambiguity through "dispatching," a process that Roland Barthes describes as "remote-control[l]ing the reader] towards a meaning chosen in advance" (40).

By associating the "before" photograph with an impression of a violent Baghdad, the writers accomplish two goals. First, they create a parallel relationship between the donning of the headscarf and an atmosphere of terror and persecution. Consequently, the reader immediately recognizes (or perhaps imagines) traces of dissatisfaction on Sabri's "before" face. Second, they necessitate the presence of a more desirable "after." In this case, the "after" is reflective not only of the removal of the *hijab*, but also presumably the removal of fear and the embrace of individual freedom. Here captured by a T-shirt detailed as "Western" in style, freedom has clearly brought Sabri satisfaction, her previously anxious face now relaxed in an easy teenage smirk. Implicit within this image is not only the argument that the "better you" of the Oriental female is achievable through assimilation into Western practices of dress, but also that this assimilation is a positive consequence of American military intervention in Iraq. The story's byline, identifying the authors as Timothy Williams and Abeer Mohammed, emphasizes this structured marriage of West and East as an encouraging opportunity to increase creative output and transfer knowledge to an attendant public.

As with the ISHR image, this duo of photographs features the formalization of the female body. Highlighting clothing as the subject and political marker, the image relegates Sabri to mannequin status. At the same time, the picture inscribes her with the transcendental impression of universal possibility. Robbed of the "messiness and complexity" that Wysocki argues is inherently

human, Sabri is decontextualized into a blank backdrop of positive potential, on which we the audience can paint our hopes and dreams for an Orient that is less unsettling, less different, and less work (169). In short, we are encouraged to project an Orient that embraces incorporative Orientalism.

The message of difference that these images convey is therefore intended to inspire sameness. Copious images on the World Wide Web continue the trend of marking difference through the presence of the headscarf and integrating text to identify the scarf as analogous to physical and moral confinement and endangerment. Each of these pictographic texts introduces the scarf as a metaphor for Islam itself. Because specific religious and cultural practices of Islam (including significant philosophies relating to modesty, personal connections to God or Allah, and the creation of a personal interior space within the exterior garment) would introduce particularity to the images and therefore subvert the arguments for assimilation and homogeneity, they are denied relevance.

Religious, Cultural, and Personal Memory

In order to further comprehend the specific religious connotations of the *hijab* within Islam, we now turn to the original codification of Islam through the prophet Muhammad, as it is presented in the religious text the *Qur'an*. Although references to “veiling” are scarce in the *Qur'an*, the text most often cited concerning the practice is drawn from *sura* 24:30–31:

[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness.

In a sweeping gesture of word politics, this passage has been appropriated by the Western feminist movement to illustrate the patriarchy of Islam, such that the female would be required to conceal her sexuality in order to avoid unwanted male advances. This argument is fueled by Western assumptions that Islamic culture views femininity as a source of shame or impurity, and therefore requires its containment. These assumptions are historically founded on the Judeo-Christian theory of original sin perpetuated by man's Eve-influenced fall from grace, and according to cultural anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi, bear no weight within the context of the Muslim faith.

El Guindi discusses clothing and dress as it is presented in the *Qur'an* in terms of *libas*. In *sura* 7 of the *Qur'an*, Adam and his partner are given items of clothing prior to being asked to leave Paradise and spend the remainder of their days on Earth: “Children of Adam, we have given you garments to cover your nakedness and as adornment for you; the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments—this is one of God's signs, so that people may take heed” (7:26). In Arabic, the garments described within this passage are *libas*, a term imbued with several meanings. As a material object, *libas* is described as clothing or adornment that serves to protect its bearer. However, in a spiritual sense, *libas* is characterized as the interdependence of both parties in the marital relationship. El Guindi supports this definition through her translation of *sura* 2:187: “They [feminine gender] are *libas* [dress] to you [masculine plural] and you [masculine plural] are *libas* [dress] to them [feminine gender]” (66; editorial brackets in the original). In this manner, *libas* offers a God-given sacred privacy that serves to limit external access to the spiritual and physical self to the man or woman to whom one is united in the eyes of God. Additionally, the *libas* is “the gar-

ment of God-consciousness,” or a constant reminder of one’s direct relationship to God and one’s responsibility to act in accordance with the deity’s commandments.

It follows, then, that historically, the Islamic person’s construction of space within the garment is a personal reflection of that individual’s specific relationship to him- or herself, to God, and to other individuals. Noraini Noor points to *sura* 2:256 to further bolster the philosophy of individual distinctness with regards to *libas*, arguing that the donning of traditional Islamic garments is a choice for each practitioner of the faith to make for him- or herself (194). The verse states, “There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break” (2:256). Therefore, in theory, if one has established “the firmest hand-hold” without active participation in the Islamic customs of dress, the adoption of traditional garments is optional. In practice, however, some women of the Islamic faith are forbidden to assume traditional dress while others are required to do so. As previously noted, France has banned the headscarf in public educational settings; it has also recently criminalized the donning of the *niqab* and *burqa* (a full-body outer garment that covers the female from head to toe) in the public sphere. Turkey, likewise, prohibits the donning of the *hijab* in public schools. Conversely, under the fundamentalist rule of the Taliban, females in Afghanistan were forced to wrap themselves in *hijab* and full-body veils, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution brought with it this same requirement under Ayatollah Khomeini (Scott 22).

According to fundamentalist and traditionalist philosophies, the *Qur’an* supports a patriarchal reading, which specifically prescribes the veiling of women to illustrate their intended exclusion from the public sphere (Woodlock 402). The fundamentalist allows the woman entry into the public sphere only when she dons the *hijab* (407–8). The *hijab* desexualizes the woman, permitting her to interact in social settings with women and men as part of her daily life. In another double-turn of word politics, it is this desexualization that has ultimately problematized the Muslim female’s relationship with the West, resulting in limiting and overwhelmingly negative portrayals of the *hijabi*.

Everyday Memory

To parry the word politics as they relate to the headscarf, multiple fashion- and youth-based blogs portray the Muslim woman as modern, intelligent, and cosmopolitan. These virtual sites and the images contained within them celebrate the scarf as a choice, a right of Muslim womanhood rather than a requirement enforced by patriarchal hegemonies. One photograph features a young woman wearing a fuchsia *hijab* standing before a stenciled Eiffel Tower. She stares straight at the camera as she adjusts her scarf, as if inviting a direct challenge to the viewers and creators of pictorial attacks against her cultural and religious marker of difference. The photograph is accompanied by text reading, “It’s not about what you see *on* my head, it’s what is *in* my head.”⁴ This young woman appears to take pride in her *hijab* as a marker of individuality, and the scarf itself pops with colors reminiscent of the bright leggings in which her non-Muslim teenage counterparts uniform themselves. The sense of personal style demonstrated by the *hijab* within this image serves to normalize the headscarf as just another fashion accessory in a vogue-crazed Western culture. This particular movement, then, intends to counteract the negative connotations of the Islamic female by mitigating the sense of difference relayed by the presence of the headscarf.

While the display and promotion of individuality through fashion and textual wit is commendable, and to some extent successful in normalizing the headscarf and subverting the Orientalist tendencies represented by the first two images reviewed, this photograph of contemporary *hijab* vogue falls into the same trap of abstraction and formalism that were presented in our discussion of the first images. Announced as an ambassador of a movement, the young woman in this photograph is generalized and de-particularized in the same manner as the supposedly

entrapped women whose photographic narratives she attempts to destabilize. Consequently, this image is integrated into an interesting and contemporary discussion regarding the headscarf as religious and sociocultural symbol, but it fails to “incorporate photography into social and political memory” (Berger 64). As such, it is at risk of being forgotten in relative anonymity.

Ethnic and Racial Memory

Additional photographic responses interrogate the logic behind word politics through comparative religious lenses. Delineating similarities in dress between the *hijab* and familiar religious and cultural clothing markers of the West, such as the Catholic habit, these images also redirect the focus from the photographed women to a broader Western audience. One particular photograph, entitled “Western Hypocrisy,” offers images of four women clothed in religious headwear. From left to right, the images are labeled: “Orthodox Jewish woman, tradition”; “Catholic nun, devotion”; “Orthodox woman, religiosity”; and “Muslim Woman, oppression submission terrorism.”⁵ The Orthodox Jewish and Muslim women assume traditional model poses: hands at the sides, weight slightly shifted to one foot, and smiling face directed toward the camera. The Catholic nun and Orthodox woman also offer the audience brilliant smiles. By displaying alternate images of religious females scarfed in the same manner as the *hijabi*, this photograph more directly accuses the reader of formulating assessments of Islamic culture predicated on artificial concerns for the rights of Muslim women. The image argues that these convictions are not based on religiosity, but are instead driven by blatant racial and ethnic discrimination. Although this is a cogent argument, the photograph fails to effectively respond to the initial attack because it and the images it attempts to counteract do not exist within the same discursive plane, otherwise referred to as “stasis” (Crowley 29).

In effect, the image responds to an accusation that declares, “The headscarf is a symbol denoting the oppression and abuse of all Islamic women and the primitivism of the Muslim religion and culture in general” with the assertion: “No, you’re just a racist.” Racism is similar to foundationalism in that it is “[the occurrence] of differences that might otherwise be considered ethnocultural . . . [instead] regarded as innate, indelible, and unchangeable . . . [and containing] two components: *difference* and *power*” (Fredrickson 5, 9). But while this photograph successfully employs reason to highlight the hegemonic strategies that are employed in the Orientalist tendency to associate the *hijab* with terror and female suppression, it does not offer a fully antifoundationalist stance. Antifoundationalism requires a direct critique of universalist and objectifying rhetoric and the proposition of an alternative discourse that recognizes particularity and respects the human subject. It requires dialogue; rhetorical stasis is a prerequisite for this type of useful and constructive dialogue to occur. Through textual irony, this image exposes racism, but it fails to engage in conversation with racist and foundationalist ideology or to offer any substitutive ideology or discourse. Furthermore, it relies on reason alone, ignoring emotion as a potential conduit toward resolution. If anything, it estranges the viewer from the Orthodox Jewish and Muslim women in particular, as the captured model physicality denotes some level of insincerity or performance.

Radial Memory

Through our exploration of this selection of images, we have seen that any effective photographic response to Western word politics surrounding the headscarf must respect the particularities of the individual human subject and introduce itself within a radial system that will construct profound and lasting meaning. Specifically, it must communicate both reason and emotion through our expansion of Berger’s alternative photography. By answering Crowley’s call for antifoundationalist rhetoric, the alternative photograph has the potential to subvert the notions of objectivism

forwarded by Orientalism and introduce a subject-to-subject dialogue. The final photograph presented in this essay may begin to do just that.

The picture is a collage of six individual images of female Islamic Olympians competing in the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games.⁶ One woman joyfully waves the Saudi flag, another aims a crossbow, the third prepares a table tennis serve, a fourth rows across an expansive body of water, and two others appear to mentally engage themselves to race. Superimposed on the photograph in large font is the message “This is legacy.” The photograph is successful because it incorporates images of real women engaged in real action during a real historical event. Objectivism and aesthetic formalization are thereby avoided through the introduction of individual subjects in detailed and dynamic historical, social, and political context. The photographed women project different approaches to their respective fields of competition. The archer maintains a determined and expert focus, a runner battles anxiety at the approaching race, and the oarswoman appears relatively relaxed. Each subject therefore communicates a specific emotional state that translates through the photographic medium, eradicating the distancing framework that the previous examples reflected. The text furthers this personalization as it underscores the women’s positions as vanguards in equality. It should be noted that in this case, as opposed to the image that juxtaposes the teenage *hijabi* and the Eiffel Tower, the photograph does not supplant identity by establishing the women as emissaries. Rather, by choosing to compete in the Olympic Games, the women have accepted their roles as ambassadors of a legacy that they have claimed as their own. The legacy referred to in the textual inscription is not only a pronouncement of gender equality in Islamic fundamentalist regimes through the inclusion of females in the Olympic Games, but also a statement of Oriental female agency in a specifically Occidental-dominant space. The photograph exudes antifoundationalist rhetoric at its most potent. Marrying reason—which requires the admission of the photographed *hijabis’* strength, endurance, and focus—with the emotions of joyful camaraderie, inclusion, and competitive respect that the Olympic Games convey, the image escapes the connotative transfers of meaning invoked by fear and misunderstanding. Instead, it promotes unity through a presentation of human emotion in a particular space and time.

Looking Forward

The effects of a single captured image can resound through history. Photographs can, and have, helped to instigate wars and to end them. They shape our politics, our religions, our economics, and our fundamental moral beliefs. Photographs both legitimize and subvert foundationalism. As consumers of photographic rhetoric, we have an ethical responsibility to question the images that are presented to us just as we interrogate text-based news, which is similarly presented as fact. The more we question, the more we may find fear replaced with curiosity, suppression disrupted through acceptance, and hatred dissolved by care. Alternative photography has the potential to shift our societal view of the *hijabi* and the Islamic faith from a “problem” to an opportunity to educate ourselves; from objects to “control” to a multifaceted garment and equally complex belief system that require our engagement; from terrorist-breeding dogmas that necessitate government interference and “protection” to legitimate choices that warrant respect.

Notes

¹ It is important to note that the male gaze need not be physically present in order for sexual identification to take place. Identification is determined by sociologically dominant sexual relations. Knowledge of normative gender relations remains in effect even in the absence of physical sexual difference. Therefore, the gaze is always present on a cognitive level, and as such, constantly shapes communicative processes.

² This image is currently accessible at <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/print/2008/1/ishr-burka.jpg>.

³ This photograph can be accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/06/world/middleeast/06iraq.html>.

⁴ This photograph is available for viewing online at

<http://en.paperblog.com/spare-me-the-sermon-on-muslim-women-by-mohja-kahf-435571/>.

⁵ This image can be accessed at http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lzokxxEMcz1qmt32o1_1280.jpg.

⁶ This image may be viewed at

<http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/08/02/muslim-women-olympians-legacy>.

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