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Commentaries on

Alia Al-Saji

“The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis”

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With a reply by Alia Al-Saji
To be provided

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Whence Muslim Women? A Response to Alia Al-Saji's "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis"

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Whence these recurrent representations of, and this obsession with, Muslim veils? (Al-Saji 2010, 876)¹

Because, I'll answer slowly, there are no women in the third world. (Suleri 1991, 20)

In this essay, I respond to Alia Al-Saji's compelling phenomenological analysis of debates surrounding the veil that took place in France between 1989-2004. These debates led to the banning of Muslim veils (a category that dismally failed to countenance even the diversity of the "veil") in public spaces under the guise of defense of French national secularism (*laïcité*) and women's rights. The saving of brown women from brown men is an age-old story told by white men and women to justify old-fashioned colonialism as well as neo-imperial cultural racism. The ability of power, however, to determine the

frame of discussion of the putatively contentious tradition at hand leaves philosophy, feminism, postcolonial, and critical race theory in complex and paradoxical binds. Perennially shuttling between subject- and object-status, the woman bearing the contentious object or engaging in the contentious practice is nowhere to be found.² Spivak examines how *sati* (widow-burning) was transformed from an obscure and uncommon (Hindu) ritual into a representative (secular) crime in order to transform colonialism from exploitation, murder, and theft into the benevolent gift of "modern" India to its people. Similarly, Al-Saji delineates how the "stereotypical schemata" (893) of western perception of Muslim women led to a definition/reconsolidation of public secular space (i.e. France) as the negation of Islam (i.e. the veil) by way of women. As a result, as Al-Saji notes, white (Christian) women are (yet again) pitted against brown (Muslim) women such that Muslim women have no subject-position from which to articulate the mutual compatibility of veiling and feminism. (881)

Recognizing such compatibility, of course, would require challenging hegemonic histories of feminism that regard feminism as the western woman's prerogative and hallmark of her political maturity. Understanding the compatibility of veiling and feminism (in one instantiation of historically complex and diverse non-western feminisms) would also demonstrate how de-subjectification and exclusion (881) prevent Muslim women from being seen as women. Given the pitfalls of this over-determined terrain, which leads well-intentioned liberalism to uphold neo-imperial cultural racism, I begin where Al-Saji concludes her nuanced interdisciplinary analysis. Al-Saji seeks to "insert hesitation into habitual western perception of Muslim women, so as to critically deflect the desire to look and represent, commencing instead the effort of speaking with and listening." (893) As we remain ineluctably caught between logic and vision, structure and sight, and reason and racism, I regard this task "of speaking with and listening" as the philosophical and *postcolonial* move of her analysis.³ Al-Saji states, "[F]eminist theory needs to be

² See "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: A History of the Vanishing Present*.

³ Al-Saji does not describe her project as a postcolonial endeavor. I deploy this term, however, to argue that a truly philosophical project must be postcolonial rather than Eurocentric. In some ways, I am using the philosophical synonymously with postcolonial.

¹ Page references to this article appear in parentheses below.

aware of the ways in which it enters a discursive field mapped in advance." (877) The very invisibility of the structure of racist vision, which in fact creates a form of blindness, and the complex ways in which racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, etc. are mutually implicated, demands "certain hesitation with respect to feminism's own position in this field, its blind spots and exclusions and its potential for cooption." (877) If the colonial project is repeated in postcolonial crisis management, such that a new law was required, which required discrimination against citizens to be seen as secularism/women's equality in postcolonial France, then where exactly are we to locate Muslim women such that we can speak with and listen to them?

The French *postcolonial* rewriting of alterity into the (exotic) veil/body that is officially French but from the suburbs is bereft of historical analysis—of just about anything: French colonialism, Islam, sacred texts, the veil, Muslim feminism. In addition to continuing the colonial project of obviating history, the so-called French debates of 1989-2004 render upholding colonial metonymies between Islam, Women, The Veil, and Oppression (similar to the British equation of India, Hindu, Women, and *Suttee*)⁴ the duty of every French citizen. This remarkable postcolonial turning of the law of colonial agency within, to internally colonize French men, women, and children, by retroactively casting France as the finished product of history, forecloses the interdependent history that led to immigration (from all over the Muslim world) and a suburban Muslim presence in the first place. Fighting an atavistic and retrograde enemy-within as the national task at hand precludes this history and its complexity from having any real significance or meaning in French public life and its citizenry.

As a result, to render Muslim women invisible and force (white) French women to choose between anti-racism and anti-sexism is to (once again) pretend as if this complex history never actually happened. The debates took place in a vacuum where, as Al-Saji demonstrates, the perspectives are already predefined. Thus, the severe ontological anxiety generated by the veil "so that a law was called for to exclude it from public schools" (879) remains unseen. This ontological anxiety remains unseen because of the pathological

projection, self-delusion, and scapegoating that is the privilege of white supremacy. White privilege precludes the object of fear and contempt from destroying the frame of discussion of the putatively contentious tradition at hand. The end-result of all possible arguments (for or against The Veil) is the explicit or implicit inferiority of Islam/Muslim Culture/Non-Western Civilization. These *postcolonial* "debates" provided no space-clearing gestures for articulations of the mutual compatibility of feminism and veiling (i.e. for reality) because The Veil is simply the pretext for discrimination and homogenization.

Because the frame of the "debates" was already pre- and over-determined, no classically learned radical questions, such as whether the subaltern can be seen or heard, were possible. Such questions might provide an opening for genuine solidarity. These results-oriented "debates" pitted French women against each other such that feminism became equivalent to white supremacy and nationalism. To reject the law was to reject gender equality for all French citizens, and to reject the frame by not participating was to reject a role in shaping national culture and identity. In other words, the false choice between racism and sexism upheld white privilege, that is, the ability to determine what gender equality looks like and creating laws. In spite of an influential French feminist philosophical tradition, white women's agency was foreclosed, and, as a result, the laughable claim of gender equality, as a French Republican value (879), could not be challenged. Such foreclosure served to reinforce "racist habits of seeing" (885), in spite of influential and dialogical critiques of this very French feminist philosophical tradition from western and non-western feminists alike. Being decidedly behind the times, as it ostensibly worked to bring *all* of its citizenry up to date, French exceptionalism exhibited precisely that simultaneous rigidity and malleability that is the hallmark of all prejudice.

French exceptionalism demanded that French citizens inculcate ignorance about the complex heterogeneous world in which they have always lived. And, French exceptionalism enshrined as law a self-righteous ("narcissistic and self-justifying" [885]) lack of socialization among its citizens in terms of the diversity already in their midst. Thus, perhaps we ought to name this ignorance and lack of socialization what it looks like (to us): French secularism. In other words, what we (the west's others) see are white people telling white lies. As a result, due to the power difference created by white

⁴ The British transcribed *sati* as *suttee*. This transcription demonstrates how little they were actually interested in the practice per se.

privilege and white supremacy, we are all condemned to a form of blindness. Any possibility of entering the game, and having the ability to change its terms, requires playing along, that is, requires reassuring (white) French culture of its innate exceptionalism. The “distinctive intransigence and de-humanization of racist vision” (885), therefore, creates a radically impoverished world in which rejecting the heterogeneous possibilities already present in our midst becomes the condition of possibly being seen (or heard).

This simultaneous rigidity *and* malleability perhaps explains the intransigence of stereotypes because such constructions/invocations of French identity are inherently results-oriented. As Al-Saji demonstrates, these “debates” were not genuine attempts at building real relationships among France’s diverse citizenry or changing national culture, but about deploying “positions scripted in advance” to reinforce what *already* has a “hold in the imagination.” (877) Because prejudice is immune to empirical reality and counter-examples (877), philosophy, feminism, postcolonial, and critical race theory are left in complex and paradoxical binds. Showing the structure of racist vision does not seem to ameliorate prejudice – even when rendered a national narrative. Thus, to make visible the invisible field of vision, and to demonstrate the constitutive maneuvers of what remains tacit or pre-reflective (885), seems to risk faith in the very (absent) reason that we are marking in silhouette. In other words, barring aside the issues associated with the metaphysics of presence, or the possible loss of the disruptive power of absence, what I emphasize here is that prejudice is not rational. And yet, we can only fight prejudice by demonstrating its illogic – or so it seems. Also, by necessarily taking the bait, and entering into the fray, are we reinforcing the fetishism of the veil? By not participating in this “debate,” French women would be acquiescing to their irrelevance in creating national law and identity. But, their very participation also reinforces the metonymic and simultaneously invisible/hypervisible status of the veil. If cultural racism as a French national value is to be undermined, given that prejudice is the innate nature of all forms of exceptionalism, how do we change the frame of the discussion? What more can we show them when the very existence of Muslim immigrants is what makes them conspicuous (*ostensible*) and the only satisfactory response of the Muslim community would be to disappear (altogether)?

The veil as indelibly *there*, that is, as (a part of) French (public) life and culture with a presence that has changed the very fabric of French identity, is precisely the empirical reality that is denied by these “debates.” Paradoxically, the diversity of the veil and Muslim culture only serves to render the attempt at de-subjectification and the invisibility of Muslim women all the more adamant and self-righteous. According to the terms of these “debates,” if white women were to refuse the false choice between racism and sexism, they would either align themselves with Muslim men and, hence, betray their French sisters, or they would betray their own culture that has granted them the privilege to participate in national culture (in the first place). As Al-Saji argues, “Other practices are perceived not as another gendering that generates different subjects, nor as another kind of sexism, but as *the* principal form of sexism that needs to be eradicated.” (882) If the body, moreover, serves as transparent testimony for lived experience, that is, wearing the veil shows that Muslim women do not have “freedom of conscience, since their agency or subjectivity has been mutilated by familial or communal forms of gender oppression,” (880) then even any counter-argument about voluntary veiling sounds hollow. Voluntary and involuntary veiling become specious categories that essentially *mean* the same thing: a pure form of gender oppression that must be eradicated for the sake of Secularism/Women’s Equality/France/Western Culture and Civilization.

This slippage between Islam as religion and Islam as inherent oppression, and the false dilemma between anti-sexism and anti-racism (880), creates the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility of Muslim women (the something “more” and “less” of racist vision [885]). The framing of these “debates” is a form of discriminatory postcolonial crisis management that names the de-subjectification and exclusion of veiled Muslim women secularism/women’s equality per se precisely because “in cultural racism, culture becomes nature.” (890) Given that dismantling this framing is not simply a matter of asking Muslim women what they want, where exactly are we to locate Muslim women such that we can speak with and listen to them? Having run up against the constitutive mechanisms of (post-) colonializing and racist vision, philosophers, feminists, critical race, and postcolonial theorists encounter the challenge of ensuring that the “unmediated quality of a local voice [does not] serve [...] as a substitute for any theoretical agenda that can make more than a

cursory connection between the condition of postcolonialism and gendered race.” (Suleri 1992, 764) This challenge necessarily leads to questions regarding the role of phenomenology in social theory or in postcoloniality at large. For example, is phenomenology, like postcolonial, critical race, and feminist theory, doomed to anchor itself on this “local voice”? This response, therefore, foregrounds the challenges that Al-Saji and I have in common in order to forge an *interdisciplinary* solidarity that can break through the frame of culture—in philosophy or otherwise.

If we are to undermine constructions that render (us all) women skin deep, we cannot uphold theoretical frameworks that create slippages between lived experience and epistemology—even when that lived experience is pitted against dominant frameworks (766). As we rightly and scrupulously “turn scrutiny back onto the vision” (893), we must also resist raising the racially gendered female voice into a de facto representation of the “good.” (Suleri 1992, 759) As Sara Suleri reminds us, such approaches grant the racially gendered female voice an “iconicity that is altogether too good to be true” (Suleri 1992, 758). Thus, I began this response where Al-Saji ends not because she falls into these traps (she doesn’t). Instead, I hope to listen and speak with her by foregrounding our common struggle: how do we stage interventions in over-determined (and rather predictable) discourses surrounding veiling and *sati* that are meaningful?

Asking this question is important in order to resist the pitfalls Suleri describes such that the body is not objectified (yet again) by a theoretical framework and methodology that seeks not invisibility and silence but radical subjectivity. (Suleri 1992, 760) Over- and pre-determined silence and invisibility can lead to what Suleri terms a will to subjectivity, which (once again) renders the category of Muslim women a mere placeholder for the theoretical processes at hand. How do we articulate the innate intersectionality of gender and race except through demonstrating their deployment in racist logic, which risks evacuating historical, social, cultural, and economic contexts? Examining context and logic enables us to sidestep the danger of implicit romanticization of Muslim women that paradoxically emerges from their ontological marginality and stands in stark contrast to the reality, pain, and death of actual marginalization. How do we create an idiom of real life that can negotiate the abstractions of theory and the impressionism and literalism of experience? (Suleri 1992, 762) The generation of another

discourse, which does not render disenfranchised others subjects who are always mediated, is the task at hand. I believe that this task requires recognition of our own ignorance and lack of socialization, which lead not only to culturally limited intuitions but fundamentally dishonest and unfair ways of framing the discussion at hand. After all, to have the capacity to begin with our own ignorance and lack of socialization is to be a subject that matters.

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Can the Veil be Naturalized? An Extra-Philosophical Response to Al-Saji

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In "The Racialization of Muslim Veils," Alia Al-Saji stands in the shadow of Said's *Orientalism* when she writes,

...western representations of veiled Muslim women are not simply *about* Muslim women themselves. Rather than *representing* Muslim women, these images...provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected*. It is by means of the projection of gender oppression onto Islam, specifically onto the bodies of veiled women, that such mirroring takes place. (Al-Saji 2010, 877)

Al-Saji argues, in addition, that gender oppression has been *naturalized* to the bodies of veiled women, or perhaps more specifically to the veils themselves, by the western gaze. The veil, like skin color or female breasts, becomes the visible marker of the purported inferiority of Muslim culture. Noting the extent to which public discourses against the veil in France and elsewhere have used

a concern for the liberation of women to cloak anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment, Al-Saji concludes,

What is at stake here is a form of cultural racism that hides itself under the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse. The naturalization of gender oppression to veiled Muslim women thus permits the norm of western womanhood to be constituted as 'free' of such oppression, as the only imaginable mode of female subjectivity. (ibid.)

The first part of Al-Saji's argument – that the veil serves as a screen onto which a certain understanding of the west is projected – is familiar from the work of Said and others. Joan Scott effectively deploys a version of it in her well-known book, *Politics of the Veil*. Scott's interest is "in the way the veil became a screen onto which were projected images of strangeness and fantasies of danger – danger to the fabric of French society and to the future of the republican nation." (Scott 2007, 10) Scott, like Al-Saji, remarks that the French debates on the veil construed the oppression of women as if it were a uniquely Muslim phenomenon, when it is patently the case that women are sexually objectified in both non-Muslim French and French Muslim communities: "Ironically, Islamic theory puts sex out there as a problem for all to see by conspicuously covering the body, while the French call for a conspicuous display of bodies in order to deny the problem that sex poses for republican political theory." (Scott 2007, 167)

The second part of Al-Saji's argument, that a form of *cultural* racism is at work in the various headscarf affairs, has likewise been noted by many. Karen Wren, for example, has shown that cultural racism in Denmark is alive and well, and busy employing the rhetoric of liberal democratic values as a justification for negative views of Muslim and refugee communities. Wren defines the essence of cultural racism as the view that "Europeans are not *racially*, but *culturally* superior." (Wren 2001, 143) She traces the theory to Fanon, like Al-Saji, and astutely notes that whereas biological racism was used to justify the forced *inclusion* of colonized populations in the workforce under exploitative conditions, cultural racism is used to justify the civil and political *exclusion* of formerly colonized peoples on the grounds that they are too "culturally different." (Wren 2001, 144) Arguing that cultural racism is on the rise throughout Europe, Wren nonetheless

maintains that the forms it takes are place-specific. In Denmark, the history of Danish nationalism and the forms of its celebration, the role of the far-right and the media in sustaining certain forms of nationalism, and the lack of significant representation of ethnic minorities in the media and in local politics contribute in unique ways to a situation in which the majority of Danes have come to accept "that social inequalities between themselves and the 'other' are due to cultural factors that make it impossible for ethnic minorities to adapt." (Wren 2001, 159)

One of the strengths of Al-Saji's intervention is the manner in which she ties cultural racism back to biological racism by considering the role of the body in the former and not only the latter. Indeed, though Al-Saji doesn't make this point explicitly, her work points to the way in which cultural racism derives an unearned benefit, if you will, from overtly denying its link to biological racism, even as it creates and exploits a bodily marker of cultural inferiority. And it is precisely this overt distance from biologically racist discourses that permits cultural racism to employ the language of French republican values such as liberty, equality, or secularity in the construction of the inferiority of "other" communities or cultures. But even as I'm deeply appreciative of this aspect of Al-Saji's work, I have hesitations about the claim that gender oppression is "naturalized to the veil." In the first place, the idiom here is a bit hard to untangle. Is the claim that when "westerners" see the veil they somehow *see* gender oppression just as obviously or "naturally" as seeing leaves swirling outside is *seeing* the wind? Or is the idea, in theoretical terms, that the veil is socially constructed to serve as a marker of gender oppression and cultural inferiority and that this construction masks its own operation by portraying the veil as naturally oppressive?

In either case, the veil seems an unlikely candidate for a univocal or naturalized meaning: as a volatile and mobile symbol, the veil seems more likely to contest than to succumb to a single meaning. Moreover, the multiple meanings of the veil and veiling have been at the heart of European debates and certainly French debates have been no exception in this regard. That various parties have pushed for the dominance of one meaning over others – the veil as symbol of religious piety and modesty, the veil as symbol of women's exclusion from the public sphere – is undoubtedly true, but since the debate, at least in part, is a debate over *which* meaning(s) will prevail, it is hard

to accept that "westerners" see the veil only as naturally oppressive and don't see its multiple meanings.

Moreover, it is unclear who gets to count as a "westerner" here. Are French women from Muslim communities who advocated for the ban on the veil *not* western? Or are they perhaps *too* western? Or duped somehow by the west? The notion of a "western" perception – even with the caveat that the very notion of the 'West' is an "imaginary formation" (Al-Saji 2010, 878) and a "complex discursive field" (Al-Saji 2010, 895n.12) – is as potentially reductive as any supposed naturalization of the veil, and may impede rather than further our understanding of the various phenomena associated with the debates over veiling in France. I want to look at one instance in which I think the phenomenological tendency to look for essences is at work in an ultimately unproductive way in Al-Saji's text and then to suggest that an understanding of cultural racism in the French case, as in the Danish case, is better served by a more context and place sensitive transnational feminist perspective.

To be clear, my worry is not at all that Al-Saji doesn't recognize the multiple meanings of veiling. Indeed, more than once, Al-Saji notes the historical, geographic, and culturally specific forms that veiling takes and the multiplicity of meanings associated with veiling in Muslim cultures past and present. Further, there is an implicit nod to the idea of place-specific forms of cultural racism insofar as Al-Saji limits the focus of her essay to France. And certainly the *affaire du foulard* is but poorly understood outside the context of French republicanism (France's unique brand of nationalism) and the history of French colonialism and post-colonialism. Nonetheless, there are discernible moments when Al-Saji seems to want her analysis to apply more broadly, perhaps even universally, to "western" representations of veiled Muslim women. (Al-Saji 2010, 877) The universal tendency comes to the fore especially, it seems to me, in the discussion of clothing and the body. Following phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Al-Saji suggests that clothing forms an "integrated part" of one's body schema and that it is an "extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self." (Al-Saji 2010, 890) "Crucial for my argument," writes Al-Saji, is the idea that "extensions [such as veils] affectively and kinaesthetically transform and recast one's sense of bodily space (as well as one's body image)" (ibid.). Thus, veiling on Al-Saji's view can be formative of the subject

to the extent that “unveiling is experienced as bodily disintegration or immobilization” (ibid.).

No doubt this last claim will be true in some cases, but it is just as likely to be false in different contexts. It does not take much to imagine that women who have veiled for a lifetime would experience unveiling in public, especially if forced, and especially if unveiled women are not the norm, as a violation of their bodily integrity akin to other forms of sexual violence. But it is just as likely that veiling, especially where it is forced and not the norm, could be experienced as a violent imposition upon the body and a harmful constriction of body schema and one’s sense of bodily space. Indeed, Iris Marion Young’s work on throwing like a girl and breasted experience might well be used to suggest that women who veil have an unfairly limited or amputated body schema and a more constricted spatial sense than they might otherwise have and than is enjoyed by men in their culture. In other words, even if Al-Saji is right that clothing can be seen universally as an extension of body schema, just *how* clothing will affect body schema will be a function of historical, cultural, geographic, and individual circumstances.

A salient point in the French case is the way the wearing of headscarves has changed not just generically over time, but quite specifically with the circumstances of succeeding generations. The headscarf was not uncommon for the first wave of Muslim women emigrating to France from Northern Africa (and coming there under newly liberal policies permitting immigration for family unification); it was much less common for their children and subsequent generations, but has been on the rise in the last decade or longer. To understand these shifts as well as reactions to them both inside and outside the French Muslim community, one needs to look at the history of French immigration and labor policies (including especially the feminization of immigration in the early 1970s); at French economic and unemployment crises in both the early seventies and the early nineties; at government policies governing the funding and formation of social organizations; and at the way in which the very idea of a French Muslim community is itself arguably an invention of the French state and its policies.¹

¹ On this last point, see especially Geisser and Zemouri (2010) who argue that French government policies have kept Muslim communities and their state appointed representatives highly visible in order to “manage, control, and

Returning to the headscarf affairs more directly, the first such affair that roiled France in 1989 concerned that second-generation children of immigrants; though many women at that time, and especially women of Maghrebian origin, did not veil, they supported the young girls from Creil who were at the center of the first *affaire*, signing petitions insisting on the girls’ *right* to express their cultural and religious values as they chose and, importantly, claiming that these values were *part of* a new French culture, not something outside it. It was this second generation – educated and raised in France – who took up the language of French republican values and used it in new ways to defend cultural rights and to condemn anti-Muslim racism. It was also this second generation who benefitted from a 1981 reversal that permitted social organizations headed by foreigners to receive state funding. *SOS Racisme* was one such organization that rose to prominence and helped orchestrate the 1983 *Marche des beurs*.

Some of these same women, who initially supported the headscarf and whose initial fight was against the racism directed at their community from a wider French culture, found themselves on the opposite side of the issue during the more recent headscarf affairs. Fadela Amara, an activist with *SOS Racisme* in her twenties and an activist and founding member of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* in her forties, explains the shift in her attitudes toward the veil this way:

You have to understand that the mentality is different [now] than it was in ’89, when girls wore the veil as a cultural claim. [Then] It was about belonging to a certain identity category, even perhaps a civilization. Up against an extremely difficult context of racism, infringement, exclusion, etcetera, this identity was carried like a banner. It was an affirmation for recognition of a certain identity, and most of all, it was affirmed with a certain dignity. Then something unexpected happened. On top of the mass unemployment that affected the *quartiers*, on top of exclusion from a Republic that didn’t want to recognize all its children...there was

surveil” them. For a brief overview of how these factors came together to position Muslim women in France in a specific way, see the introduction to *Taking French Feminism to the Streets: Fadela Amara and the Rise of Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Murray and Perpich 2011).

also the creation and implantation of Islamist sects that took off at this particular time. From then on, this communitarian system influenced by religious extremism pulled the rug out from under the French secular republican system. (Murray and Perpich 2011, 149)

For Amara, it is effectively the prolonged and unaddressed racism of French society that created fertile conditions for the rise of fundamentalist movements that pushed an agenda that included rolling back women's rights under the guise of fighting for cultural rights or the right to "traditional" cultural forms. For the activists of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, their fight has to be waged on two fronts at once: against the sexism that persists in their communities of origin, on the one hand, and against the racism of wider French society, on the other. Moreover, there is a direct acknowledgement in the actions of the movement that Muslim communities, too, have race problems (that often surface as anti-Semitism) and that French culture is no stranger to sexism.

To choose one side or the other in the headscarf affair thus landed Amara and her organization in uncomfortable company. To fight for the right to wear the headscarf in public schools meant being allied with the Islamist right, whose views about the exclusion of women from the public sphere clash with the discourse of equal rights and opportunities that Amara values in her French culture (even if such rights and opportunities are, admittedly, imperfectly realized there). To fight for the ban on headscarves – the side Amara chose – put her uncomfortably in alliance with the center and extreme right in France, both of which were using the discourse of French republican values to further an agenda that was anti-immigration and anti-Muslim. Amara was accused by conservative and fundamentalist sectors of French Muslim communities of selling out when she testified to the Stasi commission. She was likewise lambasted by Christine Delphy and other feminists for whom multiculturalism was a rallying cry. It is worth noting that some of these multicultural feminists were Muslim women as well. Houria Bouteldja, who has worked closely with Delphy, is a founding member of the group *Indigènes de la République*; this group, which is led by women who are a generation later than Amara, and who are feminists of a different stripe again, advocated vocally against the ban on the veil calling it a return to colonial policies of forced assimilation.

No analysis that is abstracted from the cultural, political, historical, geographic, and individual complexities of Muslim women in France adequately captures the headscarf affair or the cultural racism that surfaced in the affaire. Further, if we assume that there are two recognizable groups called "Muslim women" and "westerners," we cannot at all do justice to the untenable position occupied specifically by Muslim women in France, both when they agreed with anti-veiling movements but equally when they disagreed. Muslim women – caught between a French nationalist right-wing that appeals to feminism to promote a racist agenda, and an Islamist right-wing that stokes racism to promote a sexist agenda – had nowhere to stand, nowhere from which to voice their views without becoming allied and entangled with the right-wing agenda of one group or the other. Al-Saji seems quite aware of this in the instance of non-Muslim feminists like Christine Delphy who opposed the ban on the veil, but seems less receptive to seeing that Muslim feminists supporting the ban were in the same position, if on the other side of it. (And it bears remembering that the ban was supported by strong majorities of men and women in both Muslim and non-Muslim French communities). Feminists on both sides of the issue were effectively caught between a rock and a hard place.

Even if we restrict ourselves to the case of France, can we really speak so sanguinely of "western" projections onto the veil? The Muslim women's voices that were most vocal in the debates around the Stasi commission and the law to ban "conspicuous" religious symbols were those of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* and the *Indigènes de la République*. Both groups were largely made up of women born in France, thus French citizens, raised in French schools and speaking French as natives, though they were also the children of immigrants from North Africa and France's former colonies. Are we so ready to say that these women are not westerners? Or is it that they projected their own western identity onto the screen of the veiled bodies of their sisters and cousins? The latter claim may actually have some validity and a discussion of it would be very interesting, but it goes unnoticed and undiscussed in Al-Saji's essay which perhaps too readily embraces the current phenomenological language of "Same" and "Other" or, as here, "Western" and "Other."

I would contend that "western" versus "non-western" misses almost entirely the complexity of the French terrain on which the headscarf affair was fought, at least as that terrain was understood by many of

the vocal Muslim women who participated in the debates. As Said noted in his famous work on *Orientalism*, "...the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America', 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse... must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power" (Said 1979, xxiii). In this respect, the works of Frantz Fanon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which may well have represented cutting edge thinking about race and politics during the Algerian war of independence, do not necessarily serve us well when we turn to what is ostensibly better understood in a *transnational* feminist perspective which neither theorist represents.

Fanon, for example, is well aware of the ways in which French colonizers exploited colonized women's bodies, both in rape fantasies and actual rapes, and as a tool for the demoralization of Algerian men and the destruction of the fabric of Algerian family life. He is also well aware of the ways in which women in Algeria who had long abandoned the traditional *haik* came to don it again in the face of this attack. Thus, in discussing women's role in the Algerian war of independence, Fanon is sensitive to the transnational dimension of their action. But it would be difficult to suggest that his essay is in any way *feminist*. His discussions of "the" Algerian woman – as if their lives were uniform, as if there were no divisions among them and no dissent from the patriarchal structure of Algerian life at the time – would benefit from a more nuanced perspective. He also records, without comment, the fact that Algerian women were denied formal education; that veiled women were largely rendered invisible to Algerian men by the veil (and thus relegated to the margins of Algerian political and economic life); and that unveiled women revolutionaries were thereby rendered hyper-visible to Algerian men and boys, and thus subject to abuse by young men whom Fanon casually describes as being abusive in the same way as "young men all over the world" (Fanon 1969, 175-76).

This is not to say that Fanon's analyses are without use in today's world. Far from it. But they cannot be imported lock, stock, and barrel from the struggles of one generation to those that follow it.²

² Bronwyn Winter, for example, convincingly argues that caution is needed before we too readily or too easily assimilate the story of French Algeria and Algerians in France to the hijab debate. See Winter 2008, 103 and following.

There can be little doubt that the ban on headscarves in French public schools has roots in the forced unveiling of Algerian women during colonization. It would be naïve or worse to deny the historical connection, but it may be equally naïve to see a direct continuity from one instance to the other. In particular, moving from Fanon's essay to the present day misses crucial moments in the history of immigration in France and the history of immigrant activism.

So, in the final analysis, what changes about our understanding of the headscarf affair if we approach it from a transnational feminist perspective rather than a phenomenological or philosophical one? I will note only two points here. First, from a transnational perspective it is easier to see and give credence to the complex and rocky terrain on which France's Muslim feminists stand. In the first place, we can acknowledge that they are genuinely caught between the proverbial rock and hard place and that their interventions in debate are more than likely to be coopted by more than one side. Acknowledging this also allows us not to reduce all Muslim feminists to a single kind, any more than white or dominant group feminists in France are all of a single kind (despite the homogenizing presentation of "French feminism" in the English speaking academic world). That different Muslim women are addressing the interconnection of racism, sexism, and the history of colonization and immigration in different ways and with different strategic interests will no longer surprise us when the terrain on which they operate is presented in a more complex way. And this brings us to a second gain to be had from a transnational feminist perspective. Women's activism can be seen as an expression of choices made in a local and generationally, historically and geographically specific set of circumstances rather than as the expression of adherence to a philosophical principle. Certainly a weakness of feminist theory as it is practiced in the academy is its failure to take activism into account. Amara's commitments, which changed over the course of two decades, are not the expression of a change in principle, but a change in strategy. Her bet, if you will, was that the ban on the headscarf in school would do more to further the autonomy and equality of young women than would a growing fundamentalist movement. Only time will tell whether the bet paid off, but in fact it is arguable that the debate in

Winter's study of *Hijab and the Republic* is a model of a nuanced, transnational feminist analysis.

France is better off for the voices of all Muslim women, speaking on all sides of the issue, rather than their having no voice at all or speaking only in a single voice. In introducing a transnationalist feminist perspective that frames the issue in a more contextualist way, not only do we create the possibility for more *theoretical* solidarity among feminists with different ideological commitments, we also turns attention back to where it needs to be, away from theory and back towards the women whose lives are lived not just thinking about but concretely negotiating the tensions between solidarity with their communities of origin and their desire, as women, for the full range of human rights and full social and political standing.

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Feminism and the Cultural and Racial Other

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In some respects, the essay by Al-Saji on the politics of veiling in France is not new. It concludes by invoking many of the key thinkers in post-colonial theory. The article is indeed part of a larger set of writings on orientalism—the idea that the West produced/produces the East as “the other” in order to enable a clearer view of the West of itself. (Said 1978) Malek Alloula has wonderfully analyzed the sexual politics of the veil to French imaginations in his analysis of French postcards from Algeria in *The Colonial Harem*. In this article, Al-Saji joins that conversation in arguing that the laws and discourses about the veil which have taken place in French public culture since the 1990s, have very little to do actually with women who wear veils. Rather, Al-Saji argues that this fixation on the veil and by extension on Islam in France and elsewhere is a site where French intellectuals and politicians and feminists develop their understandings of normative French culture.

For Al-Saji the fetishization of the veil confirms for the people invested in that fetish, that France is a place of gender equality where patriarchy no longer has sway, and where men and women, have

freedom of choice. This discourse depends on a representation of veiled Muslim women, understood in some respects as ALL Muslim women, as a homogenous group, with no agency, no diversity, and no reflections of their own to offer to the conversation. In this respect the paper also echoes the work of Chandra Mohanty who argued in “Under Western Eyes,” that some Western feminist writings “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular “Third World Woman.” (Mohanty 1991, 334) Mohanty argues that images of “the third world woman” (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.)... are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives.” (Mohanty 1991, 353).

It is in this wider and enduring context of postcolonial and feminist theory and practice that I engage with Al-Saji’s essay. The article innovatively theorizes the implications of a truly intersectional analysis for understanding the multiple meanings of the debate over the veil in France. In this regard she develops further Joan Scott’s attention to race in Scott’s *The Politics of the Veil* (2007). Scott locates the laws banning veiling within French imperial ideology, which emphasized assimilation to French cultural norms and rejected the very idea of compatible difference. Scott argues, thus, that France does not see French of Muslim and/or North African background as being assimilable so long as they practice Islam or engage in cultural practices supposedly antithetical to French culture. Al-Saji expands on the significance of race by showing how the politics of exclusion and racism can function almost silently in a politics of supposed neo-liberal feminism. Al-Saji thus, in a sense, calls the bluff on both the French state, French public culture, and particular feminists who want to insist that the politics of the veil is about a defense of women’s rights.

Indeed Al-Saji’s complex interpretation of the multiple and sometimes countervailing forces at work and in play in this discussion distinguishes this essay. Rather than having one choose between race or gender, or culture or politics, norm or other, Al-Saji shows how the laws and discourses on veiling in France are all of the above. The author also reminds us that there are multiple debates

taking place about veiling—presumably within households where women wear veils, within communities, among various publics. However, hegemonic discourses on veiling suggest that there is only one debate possible and that is in the mainstream French public sphere. The very discourse on veiling implicitly claims that veiled women and their communities cannot engage in debate on this issue, since veiled women are intrinsically without agency, and that Muslim communities are homogenous and cannot engage in debate since Islam supposedly is an oppressive religion.

Al-Saji argues that such moves place “the burden of sexism on a particular othered and racialized group, in this case French Muslims.” (Al-Saji 2010, 881) The rest of the essay elaborates on the historical (Fanon and Algeria) and epistemological (Alcoff) contexts, which help constitute and naturalize this particular racialized gaze. This returns us via a different route to the works with which I started the essay, namely post-colonial theory. Al-Saji’s analysis moves, I think, beyond her debt to post-colonial theory in her insistence that the “projection of gender oppression” onto Muslim communities, by way of particular understandings and representations of the veil, is a racialized move. She argues that in the discussion of the veil gender analysis and gender subjectivities have already been raced. “Western and white, heterosexual gender relations are naturalized by means of the contrast instituted with other forms of gendering...Thus while Islam is taken to repress and deform feminine subjectivity and sexuality, it is assumed that western systems of gender allow femininity free (and natural) expression.” (Al-Saji 2010, 899) She argues that this is “cultural racism.” (Al-Saji 2010, 899) She develops this argument with regard to how clothing becomes a marker of race, so that “veiling is seen as a kind of material prison—perceptually limiting and immobilizing, but also affectively, psychically and physically disabling.” (Al-Saji 2010, 891)

This argument has great import for the contemporary moment in which feminists in the tradition of the Second Wave have become so influential in the discourses of women’s international human rights. Since Beijing 1995, we have witnessed a flourishing of UN Security Council Resolutions on women, war, and peace. UN Women is now established in the UN with various groups involved in supporting and promoting women’s rights around the world. This all seems to the good. However, Al Saji’s work reminds one that contemporary international feminist discourses about the need to empower women

in the Global South, carry with them the danger of the kinds of framings that her article explicates.

Indeed, intervention upon and regulation of African women’s bodies as form of modernizing project, was a staple of colonial interventions in Africa. (Scully 2011) As Sally Engle Merry has argued, many of the bodies in the UN concerned with the status of women tend to view culture as static, backward, and belonging primarily to the Global South. (Merry 2006) In these contexts of UN governance, culture is often seen as an obstacle to liberation. One recognizes the positing of the West as a zone of women’s equality, versus the problematic gender relations supposedly present in the Global South in some of the calls for women’s liberation in Afghanistan, or the need to end gender based violence in Liberia, for example. One could argue that Western media practices and campaigns that focus on topics such as “honor killings” or “female genital cutting” or “forced marriage” employ implicitly the kind of “cultural racism” identified by Al-Saji.

Again, this is not to say that such practices cannot be or are not bad for women. It is to say, that who speaks, and who does not, and how such practices get read, are already constituted by habits of meaning and seeing, as elaborated by Alcoff. Al-Saji’s essay reminds us that history matters, and that colonial and imperial histories continue to matter today in the supposedly post post-colonial world.

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Commentary on Alia Al-Saji's "The Racialization of Muslim Veils"

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In "The Racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis," Alia Al-Saji turns her analytical gaze back onto the French (and Western) representational schemas that make the veil hypervisible and Muslim women "invisible" and "desubjectified." While anti-veil activists appropriate the language of feminism, seeking to "free" women from the oppression of the veil, Al-Saji persuasively argues that it is not the veil itself that delimits and demobilizes women, but precisely Western responses to the veil. Carefully bracketing the question of actual veiled Muslim women and their experiences, Al-Saji peels off the pseudo-feminist wrapping of anti-veil activists to reveal the colonialist, racist, and sexist gaze that motivates representations of the veil (and Islam) as inherently oppressive. Al-Saji contends that such representations serve as a "negative foil" to the West, enabling the West to constitute itself as progressive, free, and gender-equal in contrast to an imagined monolithic Islam, closed, oppressive, and inherently sexist. In effect, the West abjects and projects its own sexism onto Islam, thereby using the veil to "whitewash" (gender-equality wash?) itself. The veil serves as a point of symbolic condensation, marking veiled Muslim women as incomprehensibly

Other, racialized and gendered as oppressed and "voiceless" Muslim women, indicting Islam while rendering the West "feminist" and just.

In response to Al-Saji's thoughtful, well-argued article, I take up the question of why and how veiled women are "desubjectified" in Western representations. I extend and deepen her analysis of the "arrogant" male gaze by examining how it shapes Western expectations of feminine subjectivity. Finally, I show that a different kind of gaze—the panoptic gaze—provides an alternative explanation of Western reactions to the veil.

Al-Saji argues that the West views veiled women as having already been "de-subjectif(ied) in Islam," (Al-Saji 2010, 891)¹ while the veil serves as the marker and instrument of this de-subjectification. As Al-Saji writes, "What seems unimaginable is veiled, Muslim female *subjectivity*—an active sense of self that may be constituted through veiling practices. The oppressive function of the veil (whether adopted or imposed) is equated with a passivity so complete that it is de-subjectifying" (892.) Not only is the veil itself seen as a material prison, but veiling is also seen as the erasure of the subject, its total compliance with and capitulation to an imagined inherently oppressive religion, Islam. For Al-Saji, this way of viewing both Islam and veiling is the product of cultural racism.

Al-Saji explains how this cultural racism shapes vision by drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, vision is conditioned by sedimented schemas: we see what we expect to see. In this case, racist vision is invested in seeing what will support its ideology. This results in a tautology: veiled women are seen as "voiceless victims" ... because the veil has come to mean oppression and sexual repression. Al-Saji explains that "Racialized bodies are not only seen as naturally inferior, they *cannot be seen otherwise*. The veiled body is not merely seen as oppressed, but cannot be seen as a subject who takes up and constitutes itself through that oppression." (885) While this may be how such modes of vision sustain themselves, it does not explain why and how racist vision comes to perceive the veil as a prison, as a sign of capitulation to oppression, as the marker and mode of desubjectification in the first place. Why does the veil make it so difficult for the West to see the active, feeling, speaking subject?

¹ Page references to this article appear in parentheses below.

Al-Saji seeks to explain this perception of veiled women by way of Frantz Fanon and Marilyn Frye. For Fanon, the French perception of the veil in Algeria is the product of French colonization in Algeria: the veil stands out to the gaze of the colonizer. Al-Saji supplements our understanding of this gaze through Frye's "arrogant vision," arguing that the veil serves as the limit to a colonialist, patriarchal gaze that wants to see. In a moment of transference, "[t]he obstacle that the veil constitutes for the colonial male gaze is naturalized to the veil as *itself* limiting to the women wearing it." (887) This constitutes a failure to imagine veiled women's subjectivity, for women's experience of the veil can only be seen as constricted, a mirror to the colonizer's frustrated desire to see. Veiled women are seen as sexually repressed and oppressed because the colonialist, patriarchal gaze is blocked: "For this vision, veiling constitutes an obstacle to desire and hence an object of frustration and aggressiveness." (886) Again, Western man abjects his own experience of the limitation of desire and projects it onto the veil and the veiled woman as herself sexually limited. Finally, Al-Saji argues that "Women who continue to veil seem to place themselves beyond (colonial male) recognition. They have no place within this heterosocial and scopic economy." (886) From the perspective of this vision, women are not women unless they are objects of the Western man's sight: since they are outside of the definition of women, they are not imaginable as subjects.

It is this last point that I want to press on, extending Al-Saji's analysis from the male gaze to the feminine subject. Just as Al-Saji shows that the French conception of secular space is in fact not neutral, but bears the imprint of Catholicism, so too must we investigate the Western feminine subject—see how it is constructed—in order to fully grasp the "de-subjectification" of the veiled woman. Al-Saji makes the first move toward this when she comments that gender is never neutral but is always already raced and that the co-educational classroom (mixete) already presumes certain ways of dressing and acting. Yet Al-Saji does not follow this provocative line of questioning. How, exactly, do "we" expect normative feminine subjects to act? What Western expectations do veiled women violate?

If, in the West, the man wants to see and thereby possess the woman (much as Laura Mulvey describes), then the corresponding feminine position is to *want* to be seen and found desirable. This is the non-choice that undergirds the free choice of women in the West to clothe

and groom themselves however they "want" (as long as they want to appear normatively feminine, within western expectations of what the desirable woman looks like.) Western women's "freedom" is grounded in the normatively feminine desire to be seen and desired by men. The Western feminine subject constructs herself in relation to the male gaze: surveyed, she surveys and constructs herself as a woman. If, from the Western perspective, veiled women take themselves out of this relationship of surveying themselves, then they cannot be understood as feminine subjects.

A contrast might prove useful. While Modern Orthodox Jewish women, for very similar reasons, wear wigs (veiling their sexually provocative hair), the wig is often not visible as a wig. Orthodox Jewish women can hide their hair without appearing to violate the contract that men are allowed to see/possess women and that women want to be looked at. The wig maintains the letter of the religious law while violating its spirit. As a result, Orthodox Jewish women are not visibly different: they appear to meet the requirements for Western feminine subjectivity.

But if a woman is veiled—apparently hiding herself from the gaze, creating a zone of privacy or seclusion—she has seemingly taken herself out of this dyad of seer and seen. The veil not only blocks the arrogant gaze, but, to the Western viewer, it appears to announce the woman's intention and desire to *not* be seen. This imagined desire is fundamentally at odds with the Western feminine subject, for it is through surveying herself and constructing herself to be seen that the Western feminine subject constitutes herself as a woman. Veiled women's choices and desires are ungrounded and therefore incomprehensible. Since veiled women seem to refuse the foundational desire to be seen, they cannot be understood to have any desire. If Muslim women do not construct their subjectivity through this fundamental non-choice, they must lack subjectivity or possess only limited, restricted, or oppressed subjectivity. They cannot be understood as free subjects, because the "free" choices that Western feminine subjects make is based on a desire that they seemingly have rejected. This analysis reveals the limiting conditions of Western feminine subjectivity (as also exemplified in the treatment of butch lesbians and other "masculine" women). Thus, the cultural racism that shapes the Western perception of the veil as a prison is grounded in the West's sexism and heterosexism, which condition its model of feminine subjectivity. The West's failure to recognize veiled

women as subjects is not based in the sexism of Islam, but in the sexism of the West.

However, this is not the only possibility: the panoptic gaze provides an alternative explanation for the Western failure to recognize the veiled woman as a subject. Where the male gaze is a gendered dynamic of power concerned with women's sexual attractiveness and availability, the panoptic gaze is not necessarily gendered and is concerned with norms and discipline more broadly. In the panopticon, the inmate, knowing that he or she may be watched, watches him/herself. For Foucault, "[v]isibility is a trap" (Foucault 1995, 200), as visibility mandates self-discipline and leads the individual to exercise power over him/herself. In the Western imaginary, visibility—knowing that one may be seen and watch—is tied to the self-governing, self-disciplining subject.

In the case of the veiled woman, the panoptic gaze is also denied. The veil creates a realm of privacy or seclusion that allows the Muslim woman to be seemingly invisible. If she is seemingly hidden from the panoptic gaze, then she is also perceived as avoiding the concomitant gaze of self-surveillance. The Western viewer presumes that the veiled woman feels herself unwatched and therefore imagines that she does not watch and discipline herself. If she is not subject to the panoptic gaze, then how can she be counted on to discipline herself? If she does not discipline herself, if she does not operate as a self-surveying subject, then perhaps she cannot be seen as a subject at all. In this understanding, all Western subjects are charged with the duty of monitoring themselves with reference to the panoptic eye: by seemingly to escape this duty, veiled women seem to escape all control, including self-control. Under this explanation, the Western distrust of the veil is due to the Western fear that the veil obstructs the Muslim woman's ability to exercise power over herself. From this perspective, the danger is not in the veiled woman's refusal to play the role of the feminine subject, but the danger she poses to the social order in her veiled seclusion.

Substituting the panoptic gaze for the male gaze also provides an alternative explanation for the recurrent Western desire to rip the veil off. Instead of a frustrated male gaze that wants to see and possess the woman, the de-veiling impulse can be understood as the desire of a surveillance society to monitor all of its subjects. As Al-Saji points out, veiled women have been useful as terrorists precisely because of

the zone of privacy created by the veil. The veil cloaks them and their purposes, enabling them to evade mechanisms of protection. Under this lens, the history of excluding veiled women from public spaces takes on a different tenor, as an attempt to force all subjects to be visible to surveillance. Within Western societies, the fear is that veiled women will confound surveillance systems and cheat the system, whether through voting illegally, taking tests for each other, or some other means. The perceived impossibility of monitoring and tracking veiled women translates into a fear that they will disrupt the social order. It is seemingly only through de-veiling observant Muslim women that security and stability can be assured.

The representation of the veil as a threat to public spaces makes sense under a panoptic gaze, for the veil seemingly enables veiled women to evade both surveillance and self-surveillance. From this perspective, the Western response to veiled women reveals how Western society fundamentally assumes and depends on surveillance in every aspect of public life, from election booths, to sports, to the street corner monitored by CCTV. Race and gender need not drop out of this explanation: the Western need to observe veiled women and for them to know they are observed may be heightened particularly because they are marked as raced/gendered others. We need not posit a male gaze to understand the Western desire to remove the veil and render Muslim women visible and governable.

While the panoptic gaze provides an alternative to understanding the Western portrayal of veiled women as dangerous Others, it is not at odds with the explanation put forward above. It may be the case that the panoptic gaze and the male gaze (and their corresponding expectations of a disciplined subject and a feminine subject) are both in play here, working to support each other. From the Western perspective, the veiled woman makes choices that cannot be understood as her own "free" choices, even as she poses a threat to public space in her radical, undisciplined alterity. The Western representation of veiled women is overdetermined from a number of directions: marked as other, she exceeds the limits of self-governing and feminine subjects. As Al-Saji argues, cultural racism provides the explanation for her incomprehensible difference: she is other, inferior, incapable of making "free" choices. Further, Al-Saji points out that racism is made palatable through pseudo-feminist calls for equality. As I have shown, the West's sexism and heterosexism play a fundamental role in the failure to recognize veiled women as

feminine subjects, providing an avenue for cultural racism. Rather than arguing that sexism precedes racialization, I want to emphasize that sexism, heterosexism and racism co-constitute perceptions of veiled women. While gender and race are given form and meaning through each other, racism, sexism, and heterosexism also take form through each other and through the production of figures like the “veiled woman” in the Western imaginary.

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