

From the Streets of Peshawar to the Cover of *Macleans Magazine*

Reading Images of Muslim Women as *Currere* to Interrupt Gendered Islamophobia

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Dominant images that are readily accessible and immediately stimulating have done...much damage...in how our life stories have been told.

(Bhimani, 2006, pp. 95–96)

Our hope for readers is something other than a reading that can only find what it is looking for, perhaps a reading that surprises, a place where disjunction occurs, obliged by the text to see how we see, out of the overdetermined habits of reading, a reading that is other or more than we should like it to be, always more and other, protean. Purposefully not intelligible within standard frames, it is...about multiple, shifting reals...[It] rubs against the desire for interpretive mastery and implicates an audience rather than persuades or seduces.

(Lather, 2007, pp. 42–43)

OVER THE COURSE of my life, I paid little attention to the ways Muslims were being portrayed in the mass media¹ even though the images had always been right there in front of me—during the American Hostage Crisis, the Gulf War, and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. I took the “truths” represented in popular cultural sites for granted, passively and unquestioningly consuming the narratives of otherness I saw and heard there. Kellner and Share (2007) suggest most people are largely unaware of the ways they are being educated and positioned by the media because their pedagogies tend to be “invisible and absorbed unconsciously” (p. 4). And then, during the 1990’s I had the opportunity to live in Islamabad, Damascus, and Tehran. Not long after our return to Canada we witnessed the tragic events of 9/11, and representations of Muslims in the media proliferated. The years I lived abroad provided me with rich experiences and stories to tell. However, no matter what I recounted in conversation, most people did not seem to hear what I was saying. Stories of my live(d) experiences could not compete with dominant narratives circulating in the discursive spaces of the mass media. Is this what Pinar

(2004) means when he stresses a need to watch for the disjunction between our personal stories and grand narratives?

Graduate studies exposes us to alternative ways to theorize our selves and the world, and what I was seeing, hearing, and experiencing in my everyday life (Watt, 2007) compelled me to investigate where and how dominant meanings related to Muslims were being constructed, the possible effects, and my own implication in such knowledge.² The resulting auto/ethno/graphic (Morawski & Palulis, 2009) bricolage inquires into visual media representations and personal photographs of Muslim women, the high schooling experiences and sense of identity of Muslim females in Ontario post 9/11, and my own practices of othering. Morawski and Palulis place slashes between the *auto*, the *ethno*, and the *graphy* to emphasize the doublings—the need for educators and researchers to dwell in the spaces in-between. The self is situated in culture, the cultural is in the self; the researcher writes *about* culture, and also *re/produces* culture through language. Seven young, Canadian, Muslim women participated in this doctoral study.³ Drawing from my thesis project, this paper engages my own and participant readings of images of Muslim women to disrupt gendered Islamophobia.⁴

Muslim Females and Schooling

Sensoy and Stonebanks (2009) observe that Muslim students negotiate their identities within an extremely complex and shifting discursive terrain. When I began my thesis in 2006, little work had been done with Muslim students in Canadian educational sites. Since that time a body of research is emerging.⁵ Imam (2009), an American scholar, asks: “What is it like to live in the shadow of what the mass media teaches the world about Muslims and Islam” (p. 43)? Abo-Zena, Sahli and Tobias-Nahi (2009) argue Muslim youth today “face qualitatively different identity tasks than do many of their peers” (p. 3), suggesting they may feel defensive and under attack or scrutiny because of their religion, and that they “negotiate their religious identity and religious practice in a context that often includes explicit or subtle themes of misunderstanding, fear, and marginalization” (p. 6–7). Ali-Karamali (2008) suggests the attacks of 9/11 provide “a blanket justification for anything negative anyone might possibly dream up to say against Muslims” (p. 215). She contends “[v]ery few people realize what it is like to be the subject of daily socially acceptable lies, slander, defamation, and distortion” (p. 215).

At the same time, Khan (2009) emphasizes Muslim students are not passive victims, but actively transform marginalizing factors in their own environments. Her research participants “construct a Muslim space” for themselves in their schools. Khan describes, for example, the manner in which young women use hijab to respond to the challenge of educating others about Islam. She writes that “despite the absurd questions they received about their religion and scarves” (p. 28) some of the girls feel wearing hijab gives them an opportunity to teach their peers about Islam. Two participants in my study similarly describe how the curiosity aroused in others by their visible difference (marked by their black hijab), served as an opportunity to engage difference in their Catholic high school. Another participant reports that wearing hijab set her apart socially. Even though four participants in my project choose not to cover at this point in their lives, as young Muslim women they find themselves still having to negotiate their own and others’ entanglement in veiling discourses. In her study of the perspectives of Muslim girls and their public high schooling experiences in Windsor, Ontario, Diab (2008) concludes that her research participants had “positive schooling experiences” in part due to wearing hijab, which

helped the girls to validate their Muslim identity. Alvi (2008) examines how hijabi youth view the social activities offered by their high schools in Ottawa. She asserts these girls “feel they are leaving high school with a less fulfilling experience than their peers” (p. 107), largely because many social activities offered conflict with their religious beliefs and thus exclude their participation. Taken together, this research highlights the complexities of living as Muslim females in Canada at this time. My contribution to this scholarship is from a different perspective, as a non-Muslim woman working with auto/ethno/graphy.

Denzin and Giardina (2007) suggest that after the events of 9/11, we need more original and complex ways to do cultural studies so links between the personal and the social, the local and the global, are accentuated as scholars try to make sense of what is happening in the world. They stress:

[T]here has never been a greater need for critical, interpretive methodologies that can help us make sense of life in an age of the hyperreal, the simulacra, TV wars, [and] staged media events...[to] undo the official pedagogies that circulate in the media. (p. 8)

Since “culture exceeds the terms of any one discipline” (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004, p. 23) our work becomes interdisciplinary, drawing on existing resources and mixing them in new ways. This bricolage (Berry, 2006; Kincheloe, 2001, 2007, 2008; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) is situated in-between cultural studies, postcolonial feminist theory, and post-reconceptualist curriculum theorizing (Appelbaum, 2006; Malewski, 2010), which favours “nomadic discourses of curriculum and educational studies” (Appelbaum, p. 12). Appelbaum writes:

The point is not to find a home or homelessness in marginality, but shelter *and* transport in nomadic epistemology and practices (p. 18)...In a hypertextual or hypermedia environment, history and generation are a thread, but the role of the “father” is decentered. More important than the conceptual discourse are the interwoven strands of connection which link the concepts in ever-increasing ways. (p. 20)

The bricoleur understands “the frontiers of knowledge work rest in the liminal zones where disciplines collide” (Kinchloe, 2001, p. 689). This boundary work focuses on “webs of relationships instead of things-in-themselves” (Kinchloe, 2005, p. 323). It exists “out of respect for the complexity of the lived world” (p. 324), a means to sidestep monological forms of knowledge and instead attempt to account for the complex relationships between material reality and human perception. As Carpenter II and Tavin (2010) explain, our conceptions of the self and the world are changing given the “current inventory of images and technologies associated with global virtual culture” (p. 247).

Hoechsmann (2008) similarly observes that “the young people in our classrooms are no longer positioned as passive receivers of an inherited tradition, a cultural past entrusted to them by its previous guardians, their teachers” (p. 69). As societies become increasingly technological, new epistemologies take their place alongside more traditional forms of meaning making. Hoechsmann points out that not only have the forms of communication changed dramatically, but “the relationship of author and reader has also been transformed” (p. 69), for “authorship is no longer the preserve of the educated elite” (p. 69). Given this is the world where researchers, educators, and students now live “it is senseless to carry on with schooling practices as if nothing

[has] changed” (p. 69). With Trinh (1992), it is this new ground, “always in the making ... [that] interests me most” (p.138). For Aoki “living pedagogy is always on the move” (as cited by Palulis & Low, 2005, p. 2).

Toward More Complex Practices of Seeing and Listening

Modern forms of knowledge depend on a scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge (Rose, 2007). Western thought regards sight as providing immediate access to the external world, so “[l]ooking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined” (Jenks, 1995, p. 1). However, “[p]erception...is never pure. It is clouded by the structures of language” (Denzin, 1997, p. 84). Structuralism determined that unmediated perception of an object is impossible. An interpreter is not outside the act of interpretation; the subject is now part of the object. This implies the meaning of an image is not inherent in the image but is a process of exchange between the image and the viewer, whose beliefs inform one's interpretation (Jones, 2003). Interpretation depends upon historical context and the cultural knowledge we bring to images (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Baudrillard (1988) noted two decades ago that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the “real” and the “unreal,” for images have become detached from any certain relation to the material world. We now live a networked existence dominated by simulations, or simulacra. While *vision* is what the eye is physiologically capable of seeing, *visuality* refers to how vision is constructed in various ways (Rose, 2007). The question of how we make meaning and construct our identities through seeing is a pressing issue for curriculum theorizing given “the eye does not merely see, but is socially disciplined in the ordering, dividing, and ‘making’ of the possibilities of the world and the self” (Popkewitz, 1999, p. 22). As Berger (1999) points out, we gain a great deal of information about others solely on the basis of visual perceptions” (p. 17).

In the following excerpt from *Lipstick Jihad* (Moaveni, 2006), Moaveni, an American-Iranian journalist, describes her experience of “being seen” after she puts on hijab for an interview with high-level Iranian government officials visiting New York City:

I unfolded the veil and draped it over my hair, tossing the ends over my shoulders...On this Manhattan street wearing a veil was the equivalent of going bare-headed in Tehran. Suddenly, I wasn't invisible anymore. People's eyes actually skimmed over me, instead of sliding past blindly, as they're supposed to do on a crowded urban sidewalk. I had been so busy contemplating “to veil or not to veil” that it hadn't occurred to me anyone else would notice. It was like wearing a neon sign, blinking “Muslim! Muslim!” (p. 171)

Exclusionary practices may be inflicted solely on the basis of what someone looks like, before contact is ever—if ever—established (Nelson & Nelson, 2004).

Mitchell (2002) describes *visuality* as “practices of seeing the world and especially of seeing other people” (p. 166). I am interested in how educators and researchers might make connections between bodies we see in mass media, material bodies we meet in our everyday lives, and our social relations both locally and globally. Mitchell theorizes “the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing” by turning it into “a problem for analysis” (p. 166). However, this is not self-evident, for seeing is a paradox: “[V]ision itself is invisible...we cannot see what seeing is” (p. 166). Mitchell suggests a need to put seeing “on display” and

make it accessible to analysis, which he calls “showing seeing” (p. 166). Since visibility is a cultural construction “learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature...[It] is deeply involved with human societies, with ethics and politics, aesthetics, and the epistemology of seeing and being seen” (p. 166). Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but “extends to the everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those we take to be immediate or unmediated” (p. 175). Mitchell argues analysis be “less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves” (p. 170). Auto/ethno/graphy provides a means to examine our personal histories of *seeing* and how they are bound up with larger social, political, and historical processes. By analyzing our practices of seeing ourselves and others we might trouble *visuality* toward decolonizing our minds and bodies.

With this in mind, I ponder the question of *what it means to read* (Wolfreys, 2000), uprooting it from the disciplinary spaces of literary theory to rewrite it into curriculum as it relates to social justice issues. How do we read difference as something other than “a violent act, a gesture of appropriation and disfiguration” (p. 139)? Wolfreys contemplates the possibility of thinking reading differently by asking how we might “read so as to avoid having read” (p. ix). This question is central to this inquiry into how we are being educated about otherness via visual media discourses. In my struggle to respond, I turn to the wisdom of Aoki (1990a), who argues, “the time is ripe for us to call upon *sonare* to dwell juxtaposed with *videre*” (p. 373).

sonare (verb, Latin) [soe-NAR-eh].

1. To make a noise/sound; to speak/utter; to express/denote; to echo/resound; to be heard; to celebrate in speech (Whitaker, 2007).
2. In relation to music theory it means to sound; to play; to resonate; to have a sound (Dolmetsch, 2007).

videre (verb, Latin) [VID-er-ay].

1. To see; to look at; to consider (Whitaker, 2007).

That both *sonare* and *videre* are active verbs in Latin is significant for Aoki, who theorizes curriculum in the tense spaces between curriculum-as-noun and curriculum-as-verb. Aoki draws on Pinar and Grumet’s (1975) theorization of curriculum as *currere*, which in Latin denotes “the running of the course” (Pinar, 2004, p. xiii) to mark the reconceptualization of curriculum from noun to verb:

Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor, it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it. (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 848)

Currere is “an intensified engagement with daily life” (Pinar, 2004, p. 37) that asks us “to slow down, to remember and even re-enter the past...to meditatively imagine the future” (p. 4), and to understand “with more complexity and subtlety, one’s submergence in the present” (p. 4). What do my readings of images of Muslim women tell me about my own self-formation?

Aoki’s (1990a; 1990b) theorizing inspires this decentering project, which disturbs humanist visual regimes—epistemological sites that “see” the world through a binary lens—by asking how our visual encounters with others “inform the construction of social life” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 178). While talk and conversation “is the medium in which the exchange of meaning absolutely

saturates the world” (Hall, 1997, p. 14), the media are one of the “most powerful and extensive systems for the circulation of meaning” (p. 14). Much of what we learn about others we learn through the visually orientated mass media (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Macgregor Wise, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2006; Macedo, 2007; Stack & Kelly, 2006). Through the juxtaposition of narrative, theory, and image, I seek displacements implied in the movement of *currere*. We write narratives that pose questions about our experience in the world and invite readers to join us in the examination of the complex issues that are evoked (Grumet, 2001).

Asher (2002, 2010) draws upon postcolonial feminist theory to incite educators to deconstruct processes of othering in relation to curriculum and teaching. She critiques multicultural education for its exclusive focus on the marginalized other “with little examination of the ‘self’ at the center of the dominant culture” (2002, p. 82). It thus “privileges patriarchal, Western, Eurocentric knowledge and perspectives, and normalizes the split between self and other, margins and center, subject and object” (p. 82). Asher suggests we need to understand the other in relation to—rather than apart from—oneself. She describes a “hybrid consciousness” as “the awareness that emerges out of the struggle to situate oneself in relation to multiple borders at the dynamic intersections of race, culture, gender/sexuality, class, and nationality, in specific historical and geographic contexts” (p. 85). This involves “deconstructing othering at the individual and systemic levels” (p. 83). What if—in our ongoing efforts toward a hybrid consciousness—we were to inquire not only into our face-to-face encounters with difference, but also our interactions with the proliferation of images swirling freely and largely unquestioned between local and global contexts?

Through representing readings of images in this multi-voiced bricolage, I hope to expand the concept of listening as a more active, more difficult, more complex practice. By composing a hybrid text—a “juxtapository narrative” (Bhabha, 2006, p. 17) in which voices and images are placed side by side—I struggle to become attuned to how the oral and the auditory are complexly intertwined with the visual, so the productive possibilities of the in-between spaces of *sonare* and *videre* (Aoki, 1990a) might be kept in play to exceed the confinement of humanism’s binary authority. As Low (in Palulis & Low, 2005) writes, “[it] is the in-between spaces between conversations that invoke close readings and make things complicated—that keep things open—aporetic readings that take unexpected turns” (p. 4). For Springgay and Freedman (2009) this “is a space of juxtaposition and re-alignment that opens bodies and thought to new arrangements and possibilities” (p. 30). However, there are no guarantees, for dwelling at borders opens us to both dangers and possibilities.

Bricolage creates the conditions for “epistemic indeterminacy” (Lather, 2006) to flourish. We cannot know in advance what might arise from the layers of meaning in a multi-voiced text, which draws its authority from the epistemological bazaar⁶ (Kincheloe, 2008). The refusal of certainty invites a perpetual dynamism that envisions more complicated and complicating ways to think and live identities and cultures. Bricolage offers “something to think with rather than a mastery project” (Lather, 2006, p. 50). This calls for doubled practices “within/against a disciplining space of returns and reversals, knowings and not-knowings...within and against identity categories, visibility politics, and the romance of voice” (Lather, 2007, p. 36). Knowledge is produced “within and against academic intelligibilities” (Lather, 2006, p. 41) so that we might “defy homogenization and standardization” (Lather, 2009, p. 510) in research methodologies and, by extension, in the material world. To be accountable to the complexity of lived experiences, the research task, and the challenges we face, “proliferation [is] a good thing” (p. 510), for “noncontainment [is] the mark of energy” (p. 510).

Photographic Encounters as *Currere*

To deconstruct my visual practices of othering, I include readings of my photographic encounters with Muslim women in Iran and Pakistan. Feminist scholarship that links photography with cultural memory (Kuhn, 2007; Kuhn & Emiko McAllister, 2006; Onyx & Small, 2001; Radstone, 2000) resonates with my understanding of *currere*. Benjamin (in Kuhn & Emiko McAllister, 2006) suggests that photos make us aware of “the optical unconscious...the invisible structures of seeing through which we view our worlds” (p. 4). The particular events that are remembered when viewing a photo, and the way that these are reconstructed, play an important role in the construction of the self (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992). Looking at such photographs permits us to return to a moment and a place in the past, thus offering an opportunity to intervene in “the relations of looking through which we locate ourselves” (Kuhn & Emiko McAllister, p. 2). This can tell us something about the “forgotten histories that shape our social landscape” (p. 2), interrupting the colonial gaze that positions us in the social world. Kuhn (2007) describes such memory work as inquiry that “radiates outwards from the image, eventually to embrace even broader cultural, social, even historical issues” (p. 286). As I reconsider my photographs, questions arise about my immersion in language and my subject formation. What do my shifting readings of photographs suggest about my assumptions of a covered woman, and how do these readings complexly intersect and diverge with discourses circulating in the mass media?

From the Streets of Peshawar

Formerly part of the ancient Persian Empire, Peshawar sits at the entrance to the formidable Kyber Pass. A hub of trade at the historic crossroads between Central Asia and the Middle East, this 2,000-year-old frontier town is one of the oldest in the world and still thrives today...

Nearly twenty years ago, a group of Canadians set out in a ramshackle bus from Islamabad to visit Peshawar's fabled Qissa Khawani Bazaar. Translated from Hindko, the name becomes, The Storyteller's Bazaar. In former times, caravans of merchants and travelers along the Silk Road stopped here to trade their goods, rest, and listen to the tales of professional story-tellers. Nowadays the old storytellers are gone but new stories continue to emerge from the bazaar, including my own. In spite of television images that bring this part of the world into our living rooms, it still feels so far away that I can hardly believe I was ever there. Even when I was there, standing on the streets of Qissa Kahwani Bazaar, it felt surreal. Since childhood I had wanted to travel to distant locales and Peshawar embodied the realization of this dream like no other city I had ever seen before.

Travel to Peshawar is not recommended for tourists these days, and this makes my visit feel even more extraordinary. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2001) contend that contemporary tourism is in many ways the modern extension of colonial notions of possession by exploration and I am caught in-between the pleasures of writing this place as exotic and no longer wanting to exoticize places and peoples. While my fellow day-trippers had come here to hunt for treasures in the copper bazaar, I wandered through the streets of

Peshawar capturing complete strangers through the lens of my camera. As Trinh (1998) writes, “[t]he process of othering in the (de)construction of identity continues its complex course” (p. 23).

The photos I took on that day are mostly of people going about their daily business. What struck me at the time was the seeming difference of this place and its inhabitants from what was familiar in my own life. I can still feel the thrill of “discovering” Peshawar and its peoples on that day. Years later, I return to these memories so I might deconstruct the role that my practices of looking might have played in the construction of identities, both my own and those of others. My assumptions about the people I was observing and photographing were based on information I was gathering through sight and my cultural assumptions, for I had almost no verbal exchanges with anyone I saw and photographed on that day. I wonder: What “looking” was I guilty of? Given that I had met few Muslims before coming to Pakistan, which cultural narratives was I drawing on to “interpret” the people I was seeing on this day, and where had I learned these stories of otherness?

I took gorgeous photographs of tall, proud Pathan men in baggy shalwar kameez, some with bullet-studded bandoleers strapped across their chests. I captured images of Afghan refugees who had fled their homelands years earlier with the arrival of the Russians, and bearded tribesmen loading goods on and off of animal-drawn carts—a visual feast for my “modern” foreign eyes. I had never been anywhere that felt so alive with human activity and extraordinary sights, yet it was the women moving about under colourful burqas that most intrigued me.

After making some inquiries, I trudged up a narrow stairway into a second-storey shop in pursuit of my own souvenir burqa. The friendly merchant welcomed me and in excellent English introduced me to the term “shuttlecock burqa.” We sat, sipping tea, while I decided on bright orange and negotiated what I imagined to be a fair price. As I held the finely-pleated layers of cloth which flowed from the tightly-fitting head piece I thought to myself that “shuttlecock” really was a fitting name for this garment. (Watt, Personal narrative)

Ashcroft et al. (2001) describe how during the nineteenth century, “the exotic, the foreign, increasingly gained, throughout the empire, the connotations of a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced” (p. 94). Like many others before and after me, I was hooked on “culture collecting” (Trinh, 1998, p. 22) during the years I lived abroad. The accumulation of hand-made tribal artifacts and personal photographs provide me with evidence, with reminders, of a more exciting existence long after return to my ordinary circumstances in Canada. Yet the storied memories now provoke profound uneasiness, for meanings shift with the passage of time. How do I account for my interest in collecting cultural artifacts and photos of covered women? What could it possibly mean? Trinh (1989) asks: “What do I want, wanting to know you or me?” (p. 76).



Woman wearing shuttlecock burqa. Qissa Khawani Bazaar. Peshawar, Pakistan. (Watt, 1992)

This photo was one of my most treasured, but now I am curious about what was going on during these moments of looking. Kaplan (1997) contends “looking relations are never innocent...[but] are always determined by the cultural systems people traveling bring with them” (p. 6). As a child I admired the exquisite, glossy images on the pages of magazines such as *National Geographic Magazine*, which piqued my curiosity about other peoples and places but also provided powerful lessons on a world divided into “us” and “them” (Lutz & Collins, 1993). To get this shot, I used a telephoto lens to maintain distance from this approaching woman. How odd it seems now, to take another’s photo on the sly, and yet this practice continues without a second thought. Photos are routinely taken in one locale and sold to media outlets that traffic them to a public far away. How do images of bodies from global contexts construct meanings about bodies locally?

Trinh’s (1992) reflections on capturing the other on film might have been written especially for me in the instants I was peering through the lens at this total stranger on the streets of Peshawar:

Watching her through the lens. I look at her becoming me becoming mine. (p. 101)

I come with the idea that I would seize the unusual by catching the person unawares. There are better ways to steal I guess. (p. 103)

In someone else’s space I cannot just roam about as I may like to. Roaming about with the camera is not value-free; on the contrary, it tells us much about the ideology of such a technique. (p. 117)

I was curious about the person under the burqa. What did she look like? What was her life like? What was it like to see the world while remaining unseen? Did she feel the oppression under that burqa I imagined she was feeling? All my questions were for my photographic subject. I never thought about my motives, about what these moments of looking might mean for myself.

I wonder what this woman, my unknowing subject, would say to me if she could speak back? Years and years later, reading Kahf’s (2008) description of Islamic covering made me think again about the unnamed Peshawari woman in my photo:

I see without being fully seen; I know without being known. I shore up an advantage over what I survey. Like a goddess, like a queen of unquestioned sovereignty, I declare this is my sanctuary, my haram, from which I impart what I will, when I will. (p. 30)

It is like a second skin to me. It is supple as a living membrane and moves and flows with me. There is beauty and dignity in its fall and sweep. It is my crown and my mantle, my vestments of grace. Its pleasures are known to me, if not to you. (p. 27)

Just because my veil blocks your senses, doesn't mean it blocks mine. The veil is no blindfold. I see out; you are the one whose vision is obstructed. My senses are alive and have a field wherein to play, away from where your eye can penetrate. (p. 29)

Twenty years ago, I don't know if I would have been able to imagine a woman in blue burqa as anything other than oppressed. And, of course, I imagined myself as free.

Stories from the Task Force on the Needs of Muslim Students

In 2006, I attended a hearing at Carleton University in Ottawa as part of an inquiry organized by the Canadian Federation of Students to give Muslim students an opportunity to make statements about personal experiences of Islamophobia. There had been incidents at Ontario universities where Muslim students were the target of intimidation and hate (Task Force on the Needs of Muslim Students, 2007). The majority of those offering testimony on that day were women. I heard stories of professors surprised to find that women wearing Islamic covering could be outspoken and intelligent; of bus drivers refusing to stop; of numerous overt and subtle words, looks, and acts which question, deny, exclude, and commit violence. Following are statements from three young women who offered testimony at these hearings:

Even though I haven't, myself, experienced any physical acts of aggression or any outright Islamophobic comments, it feels like there is a measure of mistrust and suspicion and undue attention to my personal appearance. I have heard people snicker behind my back and say things like, "why is she here?" (University of Toronto student, p. 11)

I feel that other students are not welcoming and they look at me as if I'm a terrorist. They don't talk to me in the same way they talk to other people. (University of Windsor student, p. 11)

I know women who don't come to campus wearing a headscarf, like I'm wearing right now, because they know they are going to be targeted. (Ryerson University Student, p. 14)

Many of the narratives I witnessed on that day echoed those I was seeing and hearing in my everyday life (Watt, 2007) and I started to think seriously about where and how dominant meanings about Muslims are produced and circulated, and how they constitute our subjectivities. Every time I repeat the word "Islamophobia" I breathe new life into it; yet neither can I deny its

existence. Butler (1993) asserts that to deconstruct words is “to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power” (p. 17).

Reading Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media

The following image appeared on the cover of *Maclean's Magazine* (March, 2007) and was also featured on a subscription drive. An instantly recognizable sign of difference, a Muslim woman in neqab provides a convenient subject for those questioning difference. A covered woman attracts a great deal of public attention⁷ and sells newspapers and magazines. The imaginary category “Muslim woman” is produced by media institutions and circulated in public spaces as truth. Where do we get to hear the voices of Muslim women? Why does this absence remain invisible? Bhabha (2007) asserts:

[T]he recognition of communication—talk, conversation, discourse, dialogue—as it comes to constitute the ‘human right to narrate’...is essential in building diverse, non-consensual communities. I designate it as a ‘right’ because I see interlocution as part of the process of freedom of expression, and the liberty of dialogical debate and interaction, that creates complex communities and polities. The state of ambivalence—whether it is an individual, psychic condition, or part of a larger group dynamic—is a situation that requires that there be political and cultural institutions that protect and propagate the ‘right’ to narrate and the complementary right to be heard. (Bhabha, 2007, p. 3)



The marking of difference is always highly charged... [C]ontrasts usually imply hierarchy... [T]he marking of exotic difference brings ranking into play. Exotic practices are implicitly contrasted with Western practices, and, in the imagination of most readers, found wanting. (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 276)

Cover of *Maclean's Magazine* (March, 2007).
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Even just the title of that, I think it's so offensive. *Do they need rules?* Are they like these, you know, uncivilized human beings that don't know how to function in society so they need rules? You put a picture of her, and highlight it red, "*Need Rules*" [and] people, from this image, what they're going to take is, "Muslim" and "need rules." That's what they're going to take from this image. (Noor, Research Participant)

This picture, it's saying all Muslim women are dressed like this, all in black and almost fully covered. Why say "immigrant" and show only a Muslim woman? What they are implying is that all immigrants are Muslims (which is incorrect to the highest degree) and that they are an uncivilized and perhaps barbaric people who need a master to set the rules for them to follow obediently. (Miriam, Research Participant)

Wow. [What] strikes me is the headline! (a) [It is] totally problematic in it's tone and wording; and (b) [it] creates a very strange dichotomy with the picture. Western culture is socialized to believe that covered women are less free than western women, which is problematic and a whole other can of worms. Anyway, the headline implies that the woman on the cover is lawless and disrespectful to Canadian culture while simultaneously not free because of her head covering. It is a confusing impression to me and I'm not entirely sure what the cover should be saying to me...As an aside, the use of the word *tolerance* with reference to immigrants (the use of the word *tolerance* in general) implies condescension and angers me, so there is also that...(Leila, Research Participant)

During the period when this image appeared in *Maclean's Magazine*, there was a great deal of media coverage across Canada around the question of whether or not Muslim women should be required to uncover in order to vote in upcoming Quebec elections.⁸ Amidst this barrage of media noise and confusion around this story, some quiet, not well-publicized details stood out for me:

The (vast) majority of Muslim women in Quebec don't wear niqabs, and none are on record as asking Elections Quebec for the right to vote without showing faces. Concordia graduate student Afifa Naz, 25, doesn't understand why this has become an election issue. Naz, who wears the traditional full face veil, said she and most other women would have no problem showing their faces to a poll clerk. (CBC News Online. March 23, 2007)

The Council on American Islamic Relations Canada is concerned about possible backlash brought on by the new rules. "The chaos that preceded the Quebec election stigmatized a lot of people, and so a lot of people were actually scared to vote," said Sarah Elgazzar, a spokeswoman with the council. Only a small number of Muslim women wear the niqab or burka, and they have never asked for special treatment, Elgazzar said. (CBC News Online. September 7, 2007)

The lack of self-restraint on the part of the Quebec media was noted by Bouchard and Taylor [*Quebec Commission on Reasonable Accommodation*, 2008]. In their final report

they accused the media of not only being sensationalist, but indeed fomenting the so-called “accommodation crisis,” when there wasn’t one. “Trivial incidents” had been blown out of proportion. (Siddiqui, 2008, p. 2)

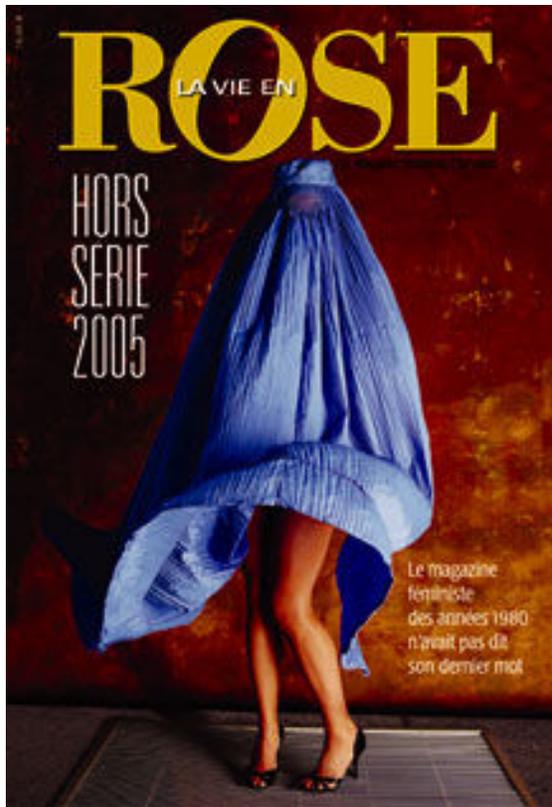
It is in the midst of this complex discursive scene that I wish to linger, for as Palulis and Low (2005) note, “intertextual weavings are everywhere” (p. 4). What conditions make it possible to hear one narrative and not another amidst the din of public debate over difference that takes place in our everyday conversations, and in the spaces of schooling and the mass media? Derrida (1995) states the “problem of the media is posed by what does not get translated, or even published in the dominant political languages, the ones that dictate the laws of receivability” (p. 87). I once imagined intercultural education required a person to become “a boundary-crosser,” but Aoki (1990b) points us elsewhere. He rethinks curriculum to incite us into “the lived spaces of between— in the midst of many cultures, into the *inter* of inter/culturalism” (p. 382).

Although it is a place alive with tension, in dwelling there, the quest is not so much to rid ourselves of tension, for to be tensionless is to be dead like a limp violin string, but more so to seek appropriately attuned tension, such that the sound of the tensioned string re-sounds well. (p. 382)

Bhabha (2006) similarly prefers to think in terms of “cultural intersections” (p. 16). For Bhabha “it is not as if something comes and ‘crosses over’ into something else, it is more that cultures abut on one another. There is a kind of internal struggle” (p. 16). Aoki expressly moves away from the identity-centered spaces such as *self* and *other*, *east* and *west* into the generative interstices. In this hybrid, multi-vocal text I seek spaces where identity “becomes a site of contestation and negotiation” (Russell, 1998, p. 9), where it is “more a point of departure than an end point in the struggle” (Trinh, 1992, p. 140). With bricolage “[t]here is especially the potential that opens up necessarily, whether one wishes it or not, from one text to another, a kind of chemistry” (Derrida, 1995, p. 117).

Participant Readings of Another Blue Burqa...

How does a blue burqa worn on the streets of Peshawar, differ from a burqa worn on the streets of Ottawa, or from a burqa pictured on the cover of a Canadian magazine, or from the burqa in my photo of a Peshawari woman, or from the souvenir burqa cached in my cedar chest at home? (Watt, Personal narrative)



La vie en rose: Le magazine féministe d'actualité. (Sept. 2005). Montréal, Quebec.

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Photo credit: Suzanne Langevin.

Sahar: In a way it shows that Muslim women can be sexy, but the way the concept is delivered is disrespectful to women who cover. I think that the picture is a bit degrading and vulgar.

Miriam: This is an offending picture. It's almost like they're saying: "*This is what could be under there.*" *wink* This could be taken as: A Muslim woman can be deceiving by wearing a burqa but wearing nothing underneath it. Maybe the men should try to lift it a bit just to check?

Leila: Wow. That's interesting, and provocative, and wow!

Thought #1: This image is good because it acknowledges the idea that to be covered is not to be sexless.

Thought #2: Wait a minute. What exactly is the intention of this image? The [Marilyn] Monroe reference and the covered woman together are strange. Are you trying to tell me that a covered woman is still subject to sexual objectification and that the whole idea behind covering is flawed?

Thought #3: I'm so confused. I'm not smart enough for this image, clearly. If I was a Muslim teen I'd feel mocked. If I was a non-teen Muslim, I'd feel incredibly confused.

Tina: I can see this image in a positive way, seeing that it could imply that Muslim women are women as well, and they do in fact show up in places like *La Vie en Rose*, and are very pretty as well. The negative aspect that I get from this image is that Muslim ladies who cover could in fact be sluts and hoes, so don't really trust what you see, which is really disturbing and inappropriate.

Laughter in Kashan

Davies and Davies (2007) assert that what is seeable and hearable “shifts with the interactional space the researcher inhabits, with the time and the purpose in telling, and with the discursive possibilities available (or brought to conscious awareness) at the time of each telling” (p. 1139). What stories could I tell about this photograph of Iranian schoolgirls in black chador? As I look at this image all these years later, what new meanings do I bring to it? What is seeable and hearable today that I did not see or hear a decade ago, in this beautiful Iranian garden?



Fin Gardens.
Kashan, Iran.
(Watt, 1997)

This photo was taken in Fin Gardens, Kashan, during a weekend trip I organized. I loved touring others around Iran, especially those possibly suffering from culture shock who were hesitant to leave the relative familiarity of Tehran. During my three years in Iran I became an intrepid traveler. I imagined myself discovering this land for the first time like the famous western explorers I had learned about in school. Iranian friends told me I had seen more of their country than they, themselves, had seen. Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark—fearless, independent, female adventurers of decades past who had traveled alone throughout these parts of the world—became women I now closely identified with. I read all of their travel accounts and, retracing their footsteps, visited some of the places they visited. (Oh, those Assassin Castles!!). As I learned more and more about Iran, I flourished. My interest in the place and its peoples was insatiable. No sooner would I return

home from one excursion and I would be making plans for another. Less avid travelers—even those living in Iran—found me courageous to go to the distant places I so easily went, and I enjoyed being seen in that way. Nobody from my own circle of friends, family, and acquaintances had ever been to Iran, which somehow made my travel seem even more exhilarating. Many people back home whose only knowledge of Iran was what they had seen on the TV news imagined Iran as a dark, scary place, which only added to the aura of mystery and my own sense of myself as bold and confident. By “conquering” and “laying claim” through travel to places such as Kerman, Tabriz, Esfahan, and Yazd I fueled my sense of self as the quintessential border-crosser, and my photos served as necessary artifacts—proof I had actually been there. (Watt, Personal narrative)

I have fond memories of this photographic encounter with these Iranian girls. Five years earlier, I had used a telephoto lens to snap photos of unknowing subjects on the streets of Peshawar, and here I was again, still collecting. Besides offering the promise of an unusual artifact I could display as proof of an “exotic” Iranian adventure, this photo provided an excuse for contact. Seeking their permission to take the photo, I was proud I could speak some Farsi and be mostly understood. The girls also tried out their English on us, smiling and laughing. They lined up for our photos, and then we lined up so they could take photos of us. This time, my photographic subjects had their own cameras, so there was a reciprocal exchange. As obvious tourists—our headscarves askew, and our long, dark coats not-quite-as-well-put-together as those donned by the elegant Iranian women—we were the spectacle in that place, wandering around these historic gardens with cameras in hand, largely unaware of the proud history of the Iranian people and the ways that our histories intertwined.

I become me via an other. Depending on who is looking, the exotic is the other, or it is me...I am the one making a detour with myself, having left upon my departure from over here not only a place but also one of my selves. The itinerary displaces the foundation, the background of my identity, and what it incessantly unfolds is the very encounter of self with other—other than myself and, my other self. (Trinh, 1998, p. 23)

Talking with these young Kashani women disrupted the image of raging, fanatical mobs I had seen on television during the American hostage crisis. There was dissonance between these openly gregarious girls and the angry TV mobs. They were not the same bodies, after all. We had been warned Iranian officials frowned on public displays of happiness, but if that were so, these girls were seriously misbehaving. If a woman in black chador was no longer who I imagined she was, who was I now?

What stands out as I look through my photos is my fascination with covered women. There are numerous “exotic-looking” men in my collection, but nothing attracted my camera lens more than a covered woman. Now I am critical of those with the power to represent otherness in the mass media for these same preoccupations. How do we work amidst the tensions so others might be drawn into these difficult, complicated conversations in between sonare and videre? (Watt, Personal narrative)

An Ethics in the Field of Vision

Silverman (1996) proposes an “ethics of the field of vision” (p. 3) to disrupt our taken for granted practices of looking. Drawing on Lacan (1977), she maintains “the look is under cultural pressure to apprehend the world from a pre-assigned viewing position, and under psychic pressure to see it in ways that protect the ego” (p. 3). Silverman explains even before we are aware of having seen something, perception has already been processed in all kinds of classificatory ways which help to determine what value that object will take on. We don’t ever look “once and for all, but within time” (p. 3) and this time has two dimensions, one conscious and one unconscious:

Although we cannot control what happens to a perception before we become aware of it, we can retroactively revise the value which it assumes for us at a conscious level. We can look at an object a second time, through different representational parameters, and painstakingly reverse the processes through which we have arrogated to ourselves what does not belong to us, or displaced onto another what we do not want to recognize in ourselves. Although such a re-viewing can only have a very limited efficacy, and must be repeated with each new visual perception, it is a necessary step in the coming of the subject to an ethical or nonviolent relation to the other. (Silverman, 1996, p. 3)

This resonates as I reflect upon how working with auto/ethno/graphic bricolage is transforming my own sense of the complex processes of becoming in relation to difference midst sonare and videre. To extend Wolfreys’ (2000) notion of “reading to avoid having read,” what if we were to practice seeing to avoid having seen, and listening to avoid having listened?

About the Author

Diane Watt is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. She teaches undergraduate courses in curriculum studies and the sociology of education, and graduate courses in second language teaching. Diane is interested in working with auto/ethno/graphic bricolage to connect social justice issues with media literacies.

NOTES

1. Funding for this research was provided by the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*. Kellner (1995) defines media culture as consisting of “systems of radio and the reproduction of sound (albums, cassettes, CD’s, and their instruments of dissemination such as radios, cassette recorders, and so on); of film and its modes of distribution (theatrical playing, video-cassette rental, TV showings); of print media ranging from newspapers to magazines; and to the system of television which stands at the center of media culture)” (p. 1). “The various media – radio, film, television, music, and print media such as magazines, newspapers, and comic books – privileges either sight or sound, or mix the two senses . . .” (p. 1). Stack and Kelly (2006) use the term *media* to mean “both the mediums of communication (radio, recorded music, Internet, television, print, film, video) as well as the products or texts of these mediums (journalistic accounts, television shows and film productions, video games, web sites)” (p. 6).
2. Participants were university students at the time of participation, and they all attended high school in Ontario after the events of September 11, 2001. Interviews were held with each woman to discuss their high schooling

experiences and sense of identity. During a focus group session we discussed media images of Muslim women. Some participants also completed a questionnaire asking for their responses to visual media representations of Muslim females.

3. Islamophobia is defined as, “a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological, and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination” (Zine, 2003, p. 2). Although a relatively new word in the English language, the realities to which it refers have been around in western societies for many centuries (Rizvi, 2005). Sway (in Stonebanks, 2010) adds that, “[u]ltimately, Islamophobia also comprises prejudice in the media, literature, and everyday conversation” (p. 37). Zine (2006) uses the term, “gendered Islamophobia” to refer to specific forms of discrimination leveled at Muslim women.

4. See, for example: Alvi, 2008; Diab, 2008; Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010; Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009; Stonebanks & Sensoy, in press.

5. Kincheloe (2008) explains: “Bricoleurs make sure that Western rationalism is removed from its sacred sanctuary as the only legitimate mode of knowledge production. They take rationalism into the epistemological bazaar where it assumes its place as simply another way of making meaning and producing knowledge about the world. Here it co-exists with traditions coming from different places and times. It encounters modes of perceiving that utilize both rational and emotional dynamics and make use of context and interrelationship in unique ways. Bricoleurs like to hang out in the epistemological bazaar. In this locale they can engage in unimagined conversations that move them to new levels of insight derived from juxtaposing diverse forms of meaning making” (p. 32).

7. From an editorial piece in the *Montreal Gazette*, March 6, 2010: “[N]othing – absolutely nothing – seems to fascinate Gazette letter-writers more than the wardrobe choices of Muslim women. In a city that tolerates virtually any state of public undress, the appearance of one veiled woman in one French class in one CÉGEP is enough to unleash a barrage of mail – most of it profoundly negative and angry and some of it puzzlingly illogical.”

8. See Watt (2008) for an analysis of another photograph of Muslim women that appeared on the cover of *Maclean's Magazine* (Oct. 23, 2006) to accompany an article entitled: *Why the future belongs to Islam*, by Mark Steyn. See also: Awan, K., Sheikh, M., Mithoowani, N., Ahmed, A., & Simard, D. (2010). *Maclean's Magazine: A Case Study of Media-Propagated Islamophobia*.

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