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One of Us

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts
Sam Houston University, 2014

MFA, Photography & Film
Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

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Abstract

ONE OF US

By Farrah Al Sulaiman, B.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Major Director: Justin James Reed, Assistant Professor of Photography and Film

With this thesis, I reflect on my identity as a Saudi American. I look at how nonverbal communication through gesture and artifact presents the potential for both communication breakdowns, as well as shared understanding. From the lens of Saudi culture, I consider how gender relations and intra-national tribal factions play a role in the division of society, which my work seeks to overcome, at both the national and global levels. My exhibit, *One of Us*, interrogates one of the most controversial gestures in contemporary society: veiling. As I discuss the notion of camouflage, I review the types of veils available to women, and the reasons why women veil. The abayas featured in my exhibit are constructed from nostalgic patterns, thus producing in the viewer a simultaneous feeling of familiarity and novelty, and in the wearer, of blending in and standing out.

Introduction

The 2014 film *A Borrowed Identity*, directed by Eran Riklis, is based on the autobiographical work of Sayed Kashua, an Arab-Israeli author committed to exploring the cultural dynamics of both the Israeli and Arab worlds.¹ The film features Eyad, a Palestinian man who has just relocated to Israel. Upon his arrival, Eyad is barraged with questions embedded with stereotypes of Arabs. In responding to these questions, Eyad warns his listeners that they may not like his answers because they challenge preconceived notions of the Arab world. He says, “I am sorry. I would have really preferred to keep silent. We’re more polite that way.”

It is all too often that I can relate to Eyad’s predicament. As a Saudi American, I am often asked about my culture. Saudis ask me about my American side, and Americans ask me about my Saudi side. I have often been asked which country or people I like more, as if one could like their right eye more than their left. I have also been asked if I, as a Saudi, agree with the religious restrictions imposed upon Saudis, as if an entire society can be judged by a few. I would not say that this is the case for every American; however, many Americans seem to think it a fair assessment of Saudi life, just as many Saudis think that life in America is a never-ending episode of *Baywatch*. It never occurs to them that a small group, and a fictional one at that, could be anything other than the reality of a whole nation. Thinking about how I might respond to these questions has led me to think analytically about the various aspects of both cultures.

Due to recent anti-Muslim sentiment in the media, and the current resistance to Syrian refugees in America, these questions have become more relevant than ever before. One goal of my work is to foster a better understanding of Saudi culture, and thus bridge Saudi and American culture. In order for more informed cross-cultural interaction to take place, we must first examine

¹ Andy Webster, “Review: In ‘A Borrowed Identity,’ Hearts Torn Between 2 Worlds in Israel,” review of *A Borrowed Identity*, by Eran Riklis, *The New York Times*, June 26, 2015, C6.

² Jeremy Diamond, “Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S.,” *CNN Politics*, December 8, 2015,

the role of communication within a cultural context. When a United States presidential candidate like Donald Trump calls for a ban on all Muslims entering the U.S., it acts as the proverbial match that incites the explosive international and cross-cultural relations that follow.² As an educated man with the potential to be elected to what is arguably the most powerful position in the world, voicing such prejudice and inducing such anxiety in the people is only going to exacerbate the fear-mongering present in what is an already highly contentious discussion. This atmosphere of suspicion and disdain inevitably leads to instances such as the Muslim sixth grader who was “brutally beaten by school mates who call her ISIS” and who tore “off her hijab,”³ or the teacher who asked her Arabic student “if she has a bomb in her book bag.”⁴

These examples, extracted from the American cultural landscape, underscore the need for further investigation into the complex and contentious area of communication. In today’s world, mutual understanding as achieved through communication has been precluded by corporate-controlled media outlets and preexisting cultural biases, as well as the historical desire to have a common enemy. The problem with a “common” enemy is that the diverse groups being conflated under the singular heading of “enemy” rarely share much in common at all. Take the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, more commonly known as “ISIS,” for example. Too often, Muslims and anyone of Arab descent are lumped together with radical extremists by those who deem the whole group “terrorists.” But really, how often is it that any one group shares the same intentions, beliefs, and goals?

² Jeremy Diamond, “Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S.,” *CNN Politics*, December 8, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-immigration>.

³ Caitlin Nolan, “Muslim Sixth Grader Allegedly Attacked by Schoolmates Who Called her ISIS, Tore at Her Hijab,” *Inside Edition*, last modified December 7, 2015, <http://www.insideedition.com/headlines/13411-muslim-sixth-grader-allegedly-attacked-by-schoolmates-who-called-her-isis-tore-at-her-hijab>.

⁴ “Gwinnett Teacher Asks Student If She Has Bomb in Her Book Bag,” *WSBTV.com*, last modified December 11, 2015, <http://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/gwinnett-county/gwinnett-teacher-asks-student-if-she-has-bomb-her-/17224898>.

Presently, Muslims represent the common enemy, though throughout its history, America has designated the common enemy to be Jews, Native Americans, the Japanese, Polish, and Irish, African Americans, Italians, and Germans, and sadly, the list goes on. In fact, I doubt that there are many people in the world who have never found themselves belonging to at least one of the groups identified as the enemy. The only thing we can do is remember our history, try to understand each other, and find a way to minimize the misunderstandings that have historically led to a time we all wish we could have prevented.

Open communication is the key to understanding the other. Communication is a crucial precondition for not only a better understanding of other cultures, but for a better understanding of our own societies. While communication is comprised of both verbal and nonverbal components, this project will focus primarily on nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication, according to human resources expert Susan Heathfield, “is a form of communication that ranges from facial expression to body language;”⁵ it is a quickly flowing back-and-forth process requiring your full focus and attentiveness. If you are planning what you are going to say next, or thinking about something else, you are almost certain to miss nonverbal cues and other details available in the conversation.

Nonverbal communication also encompasses what is known as “artifactual communication.” Artifactual communication “refers to messages conveyed through objects or arrangements of objects made by human hands.”⁶ Put otherwise, artifactual communication is the means by which such artifacts as clothes, jewelry, even veils like the hijab, communicate something to another. Based on my research on human communication, my focus in this project

⁵ Susan Heathfield, “Tips for Understanding Nonverbal Communication,” *About Money*, last modified January 12, 2015, http://humanresources.about.com/od/interpersonalcommunication/a/nonverbal_com.htm.

⁶ Fred Jandt, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication: Identities in a Global Community* (London: Sage, 2016), PDF e-book.

is nonverbal communication, as I examine gesture and interrogate what the veil as a cultural artifact (here, the hijab, abaya, burqa, etc.) conveys. My exhibit explores the symbolism of the veil, including the ways in which it is employed as both an instrument of camouflage and of empowerment. Thus, my objective is twofold: to look at gesture in a cross-cultural context, and to present veiling as a cultural gesture in and of itself.

This thesis is organized according to the dual objective of my work. First, I will address gesture from an inter- and intra-national perspective. Then, I will discuss the concept of veiling as a symbolically laden act with a double intention. In Middle Eastern contexts where covering represents the norm, veiling has the potential to render one invisible. At the same time, in cultural contexts where veiling is not the norm (e.g., an American context), veiling marks one as “other,” effectively making the individual hyper-visible.

Gesture

Given the relative importance of nonverbal communication to conveying meaning, accounting for gesture is a significant component of comprehension. Gestures are woven into the fabric of our daily lives. We wave, point, beckon, and use our hands while arguing or speaking animatedly, expressing ourselves with gestures often without thinking. Without exception, gestures are likewise an important part of everyday communication in Saudi Arabia. While the gestures featured in this project can be found throughout Saudi Arabia, some of them are only regionally or subculturally understood. The meaning of certain gestures can vary across cultures and regions, so understanding the cultural or regional specificity of a gesture is necessary for avoiding misinterpretation.

Gesture & International Conflict

Shared understanding, however, is harder to achieve than we might think; despite the wealth and breadth of our technology, we as humans still fight miscommunication every day. These misunderstandings cause us problems not only in our closest relationships, but in our relationships as nations as well. For an example of the polysemic quality of gestures, one only has to look as far as the communicative faux pas committed by President George H.W. Bush. In 1992, while visiting a group of protesting farmers in Australia, he tried to flash a peace sign, but instead of facing his palm outward, he faced his palm inward. This small, seemingly insignificant variation changed the meaning of the sign from “peace” to “fuck you” for the Australian viewer.

The case of former Vice President Walter Mondale also illustrates how a single misunderstood gesture can place a strain on international communication. In 1975, Mondale was invited to speak to the Japanese Diet. Upon noticing that during his speech his audience had their eyes closed, he became angry and frustrated. After his speech, he asked the U.D. ambassador why he even bothered to come and talk to the assembly in the first place. The ambassador, confused, asked what he meant, to which Mondale replied, “They didn’t care to hear what I had today; they were sleeping.” The ambassador then explained that it is customary for them to shut “their eyes to close out everything else in order to digest your speech.”⁷

An American couple on their honeymoon in New Zealand provides yet another example of how the context-dependent nature of gestures can lead to misunderstanding. The couple ran a stop sign and got pulled over by a police officer. He was about to let them go with just a warning when the American man happily gave the officer the thumbs up as a “thank you” gesture. The

⁷ Kris Rugsaken, “Body Speaks: Body Language around the World,” *Clearinghouse: Academic Advising Resources*, <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/body-speaks.aspx>.

police officer quickly called for backup and handcuffed the American for his rude gesture.⁸ As this example demonstrates, understanding the cultural variance of nonverbal gestures and the clues of body language can help us communicate more successfully.

Gesture & Gender

Just as people struggle to achieve effective communication across national and cultural lines, they also struggle to achieve effective communication across gender lines. Saudi men and women, in particular, struggle in their relationships due to a lack of communication. This lack of communication is culturally encouraged and developed from an early age. The adoption of Wahhabi doctrines, one of which prevents the intermixing of the sexes, has been a dominant social force in Saudi Arabia since the 1800s. This practice of segregating the genders, which originated from Muhammed ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab’s teachings,⁹ discourages Saudi men and women from mixing together. The practice has created a society where men and women are not taught how to talk to each other, and thus rarely enjoy each other’s company. In fact, gender segregation has become such a salient part of everyday life that many couples choose to spend little or no time together, even when Islam permits it.

This difficulty in establishing an open line of communication between genders was brought into focus for me when I was out on a date with my husband. We had chosen to go to dinner at an outdoor restaurant. After sitting and chatting for a while, my phone rang. I answered it, and it was my best friend calling me. She said that she was sitting with a group of her friends across the restaurant. After exchanging pleasantries, I asked her why she was calling, and she said that she and her friends wanted to know what my husband and I were talking about. I was

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sebastian Maisel and John Shoop, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab States Today: An Encyclopedia of Life in the Arab States, Volume 1 and 2* (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), 227-229.

very confused by the question, so she explained that they never went out and talked to their husbands in the happy, animated way that my husband and I were speaking to each other. This group of women wanted me to tell them what my husband and I were talking about so that they could use the same topics with their own husbands. This example speaks to the prevalence of communication problems between Saudi men and women, and the need to study variation in communication not only across cultures, but among members of the same culture as well.

Gesture & Intra-national Conflict

With this thesis, I attempt to bridge the gap in communication between Saudi men and women, as well as between the Hijazi and Najdis, the two competing factions that make up Saudi society today. In his book, *King Hussain and the Kingdom of the Hijaz*, Randall Baker identifies the term “Hijaz” as deriving “from the great escarpment that rises to the south like a wall behind Mecca and runs parallel to the coast as far as Yemen.”¹⁰ Interestingly, “Hijaz” also means barrier in the Arabic language, which appropriately characterizes this group’s relations with the Najdis and its place in Saudi society. Historically, the Hijazi lived mainly in cities such as Jeddah and Mecca in the region west of the abovementioned barrier. For almost 1,000 years, the Hashemite governed the area, until King Abdullaziz took it over in 1924. At this time, the Hijazis, unlike the Najdis, were better educated and had an established political structure in place, a political structure which later served as a model for Abdulaziz Al Saud, who used it to organize his own Najdis-ruled government.¹¹ Contrary to the Hijazis of this period, the Najdis were mainly tribal and nomadic, and lived in the area to the east of the barrier. The current Saudi king, King Salman ibn Abdulaziz, and all of the members of the royal family are Najdis. In fact, as Mai Yamani notes in his treatise, *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity*, it is the

¹⁰ Randall Baker, *King Hussain and the Kingdom of Hejaz* (New York: Oleander, 1979), 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

Najdis who occupy high-ranking government offices and who serve as religious leaders.¹² The Hijazis, by contrast, are treated as less than equal; they hold a nominal social status, and are the recipients of prejudice. Prejudice of this sort may be observed in the rarity of marriages between the two groups. Because Hijazis seldom marry into Najdis families, Hijazis remain unassimilated into the Najdi ruling faction and are relegated to the margins of society.

Abdulziz's main challenge at the time was to make a united kingdom out of the mostly impoverished and uneducated people who had been fragmented for centuries by tribe, religion, desert, and urban life. One way he attempted to create a unified people was through the introduction of a law in 1964 that sought to standardize forms of dress in men's places of work. That meant that the urban-dwelling Hijazis could no longer wear their traditional *jubba* (overcoat), *umama* (headdress), and turban; they were now required to wear the "Wahabi national dress," which included a *thobe*, and a white *ghutrah* or a red and white headdress called a *shmagh*. King Abdulziz regarded standardization as the primary means for achieving cultural unification. In addition to standardizing ways of dress, he also sought to standardize different dialects in the region through the introduction of classical Arabic in all educational contexts, thus ostensibly bridging longstanding cultural chasms.¹³

As it relates to the various dialects present in the Arab world today, prestige is largely responsible for determining which dialects are favored over others. Much like dialect, prestige, too, is inextricably tied to the notion of ethnicity, a term used to refer to a phenomenon wherein people come to identify as a group.¹⁴ Ethnicity, dialect, and prestige are all interrelated concepts,

¹² Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 11.

¹³ Janet Watson, *The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

¹⁴ Eirlys Davies and Abdelali Bentahila, "Ethnicity and Language," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. Kees Versteegh (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 58.

which can be supported by the fact that the Najdis are firmly ensconced in the upper echelons of society, and thus they tend to demonstrate a higher esteem of the Najdi accent, along with more concerted efforts to preserve it.¹⁵ The Najdis believe themselves to be the “real” Saudis, and thus their dialect to be the “real” Saudi dialect. This belief has been perpetuated by the economic and historical position of Najdis in the kingdom. The Najdis’ historical position of power has led non-Najdis to emulate their way of speaking, and it moreover reflects the need to fit into (by way of adopting the Najdis dialect) an established community where Najdis are entrenched in the most influential areas of society.

With my project, I address the need to archive the different gestures between Saudis and non-Saudis, Saudi men and women, and Hijazi and Najdis for future generations. These gestures are a vital cultural manifestation derived from a lack of words to facilitate communication. This function of gestures is a rich cultural characteristic that transcends time, linking today with the nomadic culture of the tribes that once used these gestures to facilitate conversation in a country constantly flooded with such visitors as pilgrims, merchants, and settlers from foreign lands. I believe that these gestures helped foster understanding by acting as a “universal language,” much in the same way that English does today. I think the best way to overcome communication obstacles is to first develop a better understanding of ourselves or our identity as a people, and of others. The Holy Quran states, “We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another,”¹⁶ meaning that tribal identities—or national and gendered identities—are not meant to separate one from another, but bring us together through the exchange of diverse perspectives.

¹⁵ Reem Bassiouney, *Arabic Sociolinguistics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 26.

¹⁶ Qur’an 49:13.

Throughout this thesis, I am focusing on tribal differences in Saudi Arabia, in addition to the cultural identities of American and Saudi women, because both of these topics are relevant to my own personal identity. Tribal differences are part of my everyday life back in Saudi Arabia. While I was raised as a Najdi in a family that originated in Unayzah in the central province of Al Qaseem,¹⁷ my husband originates from the Hijazi area of Al Madinah Al Munawarah, which is known by many different names, including Dar Al Higra, or “Home of Immigration.”¹⁸ Each of these groups has their own rich heritages, traditions, and cultural identities. Further complicating my own sense of self, is the fact that both my mother and my mother-in-law are American. Together, these indivisible parts of my cultural heritage govern my own household and how I raise my children.

I have been asked on several occasions how I separate these issues within myself, and I consistently reply that I do not. I cannot separate these highly personal issues because the borders separating them are less like a definitive dividing line, and more like a tenuous “narrow strip along a steep edge.”¹⁹ The edges of my personality and beliefs create a vague, undetermined place in a constant state of transition, a place in which the prohibited and forbidden are in a constant state of flux and are rife with emotional residue. I find the different cultures beautiful and fascinating, and they have only strengthened my capacity for tolerance, compassion, and camouflage.

¹⁷ “Qaseem City Profile,” *The Saudi Network*, accessed January 3, 2016, <http://www.the-saudi.net/saudi-arabia/qaseem/Qaseem%20City%20-%20Saudi%20Arabia.htm>

¹⁸ “Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah,” *The Saudi Network*, accessed January 3, 2016, <http://www.thesaudimarkets.com/saudi-arabia/madinah/index.html>

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Fronterra* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.

Veiling

Types of Veils

One means of veiling, the hijab (headscarf), is an intensely powerful symbol of a Muslim woman's identity that has various meanings for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While the hijab is an iconic form of veiling, variations nonetheless exist. For example, there is the shayla. The shayla, popular in the Gulf region, is worn as a loose-fitting headscarf set in place at the shoulder, leaving the neck visible. Then there is the al-amira, a two-piece headscarf consisting of a close-fitting scarf covered by another tube-like scarf, leaving the neck covered and only the face showing. The khimar, on the other hand, is a long veil that covers the body just above the waist, leaving only the face visible. The chador is a large open fabric held together at the chin to cover the body and leave the face visible; a smaller headscarf can be worn underneath the chador. The niqab, by contrast, covers the entire body, leaving only the eyes visible. Finally, the burqa, the most conservative form of the veil, covers the body in its entirety, including a gauzelike cover over the eyes.²⁰

The hijab and its variations have been one of the latest focuses of the Western gaze, as shedding cultural characteristics has traditionally been one of the Western world's requirements for integrating into society. The social psychology of dress, where "dress" refers to "the total arrangement of outwardly detectable body modifications and all material objects added to it in the form of body supplements," argues that dress serves two primary purposes: to modify "body processes" and to act as a "medium for communication."²¹ Indeed, the camouflage that is

²⁰ "French Police Fine Muslim Driver for Wearing Veil," *BBC*, last modified April 23, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8641070.stm>.

²¹ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (1992): 1.

achieved through veiling may be seen as one such means of modifying body processes in that it seeks to make an otherwise visible body invisible.

Why Women Veil

Women choose to veil for a variety of reasons, some of which include: the belief that it is a requirement of Islam, the desire to distinguish themselves from other Muslims through the color or style of the veil, and the desire to be seen as Muslim by other members of society. The latter two of these three reasons are most relevant to the project at hand, as they allude to the dual potential of the veil, to become hyper-visible through demarcation, and to become invisible through relative assimilation. The veil allows one to achieve assimilation through camouflage. The ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi is regarded by many as the first philosopher of camouflage. Alex Anatole, author of *The Essence of Tao*, summarizes Laozi's position on camouflage, remarking that:

Taoist priority to follow the laws of God while respecting the laws of man. This philosophical principle reminds us to follow our spiritual path (laws of God) even while we deal with the pervasive social structure (laws of man) with which we must interact every day. To try to change it is much too difficult and would consume too much energy.²²

In other words, rather than attempt to overhaul existing social structures so as to conform to religious and spiritual beliefs, we are advised to work within the constraints of said structures.

One way to fulfill religious and spiritual obligations while simultaneously adhering to prevailing social dictums is through camouflage. For example, Muslim women seek to camouflage—via the veil—to assimilate into society while at the same time remaining faithful to Islam. The practice of veiling is often a way for Muslim women to feel connected to their cultures and communities, and is a source of permanence in face of the cultural change and displacement. For these reasons,

²² Alex Anatole, *The Essence of Tao* (Westen: Center of Taoist Studies, 2009), 206.

abandoning the veil for the sake of normalization is not an appealing option for many Muslim women. For the immigrant from a devout Islamic culture, mimicry means widening the gap between the public and the private persona, which can result in complete alienation – not just from the host culture and from the immigrant community, but from the self.²³ After all, as Lana Tolaymat and Bonnie Moradi note in their study, the three most common reasons to wear a hijab as identified by female Muslim participants were “because the Quran/Islam requires that I do so” (90%), “to show my religiosity/modesty” (69%), and “to show others my Muslim identity” (64%).²⁴ However, the study’s participants indicated that they sought to achieve these aims while acting as productive members of a progressive Western society. Although, as many Muslim women find, wearing a hijab—or any other type of veil, for that matter—and seamlessly assimilating into Western society may be easier said than done.

In the U.S., for example, *The Washington Post* reported on a twenty-year-old Muslim woman who was fired from Abercrombie & Fitch for refusing to remove her hijab. “When Khan was fired in February,” *The Post* writes, “she told KTVU that the human resources representative ‘told me that my hijab was not in compliance with the “look policy” and that they don’t wear any scarves or hats while working.’”²⁵ Despite the resistance they so often meet, women who veil are now creating a public space for Islam, and in doing so, are countering many of the Western preconceptions about Islam. People such as Lamia Arafa and Ibtihaj Muhammad are challenging how women who choose to veil are seen in the West. Arafa, a twenty year-old Muslim student at

²³ Esra Santesso, *Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 130.

²⁴ Lana Tolaymat and Bonnie Moradi, “U.S. Muslim Women and Body Image: Links Among Objectification Theory Constructs and the Hijab,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2011): 383.

²⁵ Sarah Anne Hughes, “Hani Khan Says She Was Fired by Abercrombie & Fitch Over Hijab,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Jun. 28, 2011.

Florida State University, says that wearing her headscarf is “kind of like walking around with a billboard saying, ‘I’m Muslim! It is sort of a perfect conversation opener.’”²⁶ Muhammad, a Muslim American female athlete training for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, is changing the preconception that veiling represents a hindrance. She comments on anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S., remarking that she “refuses to let them [the sentiments] stand in the way of her identity, both as a Muslim and a proud American athlete.”²⁷

In this sense, when Muslim women choose or are pressured to lose the veil to be viewed as consistent with social standards, they, too, are engaged in an act of camouflage. By removing the veil, they are often camouflaging themselves as a secular member of Western society. Is this the sort of camouflage that Muslim women like Khan need to resort to? By camouflaging themselves, they give the viewers an image that makes the viewer comfortable. By being aware of and sensitive to the dominant social group, we no longer appear to stand out and are accepted as loyal members in a dysfunctional society. But it is necessary to remember Laozi’s view on camouflage: “We must be careful not to believe our own disguise. We must be clear about what we do to satisfy our community and what we do for ourselves. We must never fall for our own ‘act.’”²⁸ As Laozi reminds, we must ask for whom we camouflage. Do we remove the veil and thus camouflage ourselves to make others comfortable with our image? Or, do we do this to make ourselves comfortable in an uncomfortable, unaccepting society?

²⁶ Daniella Albinum, “The Hijab Lesson: Muslim Student Uses Her Headscarf to Teach about Islam,” *USA Today College*, last modified October 20, 2015, <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/10/20/muslim-hijab-education>.

²⁷ Carmelo Imbesi, “Confronting Misconceptions as a Muslim in America,” *CBS News*, last modified December 18, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/media/muslim-in-america-misconceptions-anti-muslim-backlash-safety/3>.

²⁸ Alex Anatole, *The Essence of Tao* (Westen: Center of Taoist Studies, 2009), 206.

Deconstructing the Veil & Accompanying Stereotypes

Surely, such discomfort stems from prevailing stereotypes about Muslims, such as the generalization that all Muslims are religious extremists and radicalized terrorists. “The whole idea of a stereotype,” according to Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, “is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all of this great diversity.”²⁹ In interpreting the veil as some sort of shorthand signaling one of the “types” of Muslims described above, one is, as Achebe puts it, simplifying what can otherwise be simply understood as diversity.

We can see such simplification at work in the hate backlash that occurred in the wake of 9/11. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh, was gunned down on September 15, 2001 in Mesa, Arizona. Waqar Hasan, a Muslim, was also murdered on September 15, 2001 in Dallas, Texas. Vasudev Patel, a Hindu, was killed days later in nearby Mesquite, Texas. Three different men, three different faiths, all inaccurately identified as “Islamic extremists.” In their attempts to create a singular scapegoat, upon which all of their fears and misgivings surrounding the “other” could be laid, the American public implicitly incited the hate crimes that ensued by failing to recognize key cultural and religious differences between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. Fear sees only difference, difference that has to be erased. When this anxiety is compounded by willful ignorance about non-Christian faiths, it becomes toxic.³⁰

Ignorance lies not only in the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists, but also in the stereotype that asserts that Muslim women veil in an effort to de-sexualize themselves, wherein wearing the hijab reflects an internalization of the view that women are sexual objects and need

²⁹ Chinua Achebe, *BrainyQuote.com*, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/chinuaache181261.html>, accessed May 2, 2016.

³⁰ Kamakshi Murti, *To Veil or not to Veil: Europe's Shape-Shifting 'Other'* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

to be covered.³¹ In fact, this position can find some support in the Qur'an, which instructs women to "lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passions and do not display their adornment except what appears thereof. And let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms."³²

While this may have been the initial purpose of veiling, or at least one purpose of veiling, research on Muslim women's perspectives suggests some perceived positive functions as well. Studies in the United States and other Western countries suggest that Muslim women wear the hijab to reflect a Muslim identity, for social reinforcement from friends and family, to gain esteem or respect, and as a sense of religious duty. Therefore, veiling as a response to religious piety is only one of its many purposes. Rather than a symbol of disempowerment, many women have "taken back" the veil, the hijab, in order to claim the gaze and to become the ones who observe the world.³³

My Work & Its Influences

In her 2014 piece *How Not to Be Seen*, Hito Steyerl identifies ways "not to be seen," including being "a woman over 50," "living in a gated community," and veiling. Steyerl's statement has prompted me to think about the invisibility—or what could in today's political atmosphere simultaneously be viewed as the hyper-visibility—that is granted by veiling. You see, one can only achieve invisibility in an environment that allows the veil to achieve its goal, which is to camouflage. Camouflage, by definition, is "the use of materials, coloration, or illumination for concealment, by making objects hard to see."³⁴ In Saudi Arabia, for example,

³¹ Lana Tolaymat and Bonnie Moradi, "U.S. Muslim Women and Body Image: Links Among Objectification Theory Constructs and the Hijab," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 3 (2011): 383.

³² Qur'an 24:31.

³³ Rhys Williams and Gira Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves*," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2007): 269-287.

³⁴ Sylvia Mader, *Concepts of Biology* (Content Technologies, 2016). Page number?

the presence of a woman dressed in a black burqa, where she is fully covered with only her eyes visible, will never draw undue attention in public because everyone is dressed that way; through the burqa, the veil, she is bestowed the power of invisibility. At the same time, however, if that woman were to wear a burqa or an abaya in America, she achieves the opposite of invisibility: she achieves a state of hyper-visibility in a place where most of the population blends in and is typically ignored.

In an effort to highlight the multiple interpretations offered by the same gesture (here, veiling) implemented in different contexts, I have collapsed the terms “visibility” and “invisibility” to form the singular term “(in)visibility.” I use “(in)visibility” in my own work to remind the viewer that gestures or artifacts, like all modes of expression, are not embedded within one true meaning; rather, it is through the environment in which they are deployed that they acquire meaning. In the case of the veil, the meaning that this particular artifact carries is derived, in part, from the society in which the wearer finds herself (i.e., Western or non-Western), as well as the meaning she personally constructs for the artifact. My piece pays special attention to how wearers deconstruct, and then reconstruct through the use of modern and novel fabrics, the more traditional meaning usually assigned to the veil. With this work, I rearrange familiar materials whose expressive patterns evolve into compositions of unfamiliar forms, thus making the invisible visible. This work seeks to combat the demonization of the veil by creating a bridge of familiarity through visual stimuli: American Midwestern iconography.

Like Steyerl, Brian Bress shares the initiative to question the taken-for-granted with respect to what is seen and unseen, as is exemplified in his piece *Undercover*. While *Undercover* is foremost a commentary on the current state of the profit-driven art scene, I was inspired by how camouflage was operating within this work. I found myself noticing that for the

artist, dealer, or collector, the primary goal of camouflage is to blend in. Everyone wants to be in the know, to be one of the cool artists, dealers, or buyers. This led me to think about veiling in America, where blending in is held in such high regard. I questioned if veiling as a communicative act, a gesture of sorts, could reach the same state of normalization as, say, a handshake. I questioned if it was possible to both veil and blend in, to camouflage.

James Taylor, curator of the exhibition “Camouflage” at the London Imperial War Museum notes that camouflage “was influenced by...different ways to deconstruct, adding colored shapes and breaking up recognizability.”³⁵ In this project, I break up the easily recognizable abaya through the application of traditional, iconic American Midwestern fabrics in a digitally created Western environment, thus camouflaging a hyper-visible object like an abaya.

One of Us

This piece, entitled *One of Us*, is comprised of six video clips looped together and played on one large TV monitor installed in the gallery space. Each video will portray a different theme based on the abaya used in it: for example, jeans (everyday), leaves (fall), Coke-a-Cola (Americana), fireworks (the Fourth of July). The videos are self-portrait vignettes of myself irreverently performing distinctly American gestures, duck hunting, batting from home base etc.

For this piece, I have created five different abayas made out of fabrics commonly used in the Midwest. I have chosen these fabrics because of their connection to everyday life in the Midwest. These fabrics, which are camouflage, jeans, horses, Coke-a-Cola, and collegiate memorabilia, convey a comfortable iconography, as well as instill a sense of nostalgia through their common representation of my past as a Midwesterner. Such comfort through familiarity produces a reaction in the viewer that lies in direct opposition to the typical reaction experienced

³⁵ Suzy Menkes, “Camouflage: The Art of War,” *The New York Times*, last modified April 2, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/02/style/02iht-fcamo.1.5109218.html?_r=0.

toward the typical viewer of the abaya. “Typical” reactions could be fear of the unknown, presumed connections to terrorism and other Muslim stereotypes, or perceived oppression of the person wearing the abaya or veil.

On the topic of what is typical, a typical abaya is usually made out of black or a dark-colored fabric, which I suggest may draw even more attention to the wearer as black, in many cultures, is often associated with sinister and evil things. A study by Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich at Cornell University investigated whether the color of a person’s clothing can impact his or her behavior or bias the judgment of those viewing the wearer.³⁶ Perhaps a multicolored pattern more commonly designated “American” would change the symbolism usually associated with said garment and grant social acceptance to those who choose to wear a veil. Perhaps it would help to build a society in which variances are seen as fascinating aspects of a diverse population, instead of behavior that needs to be eradicated to preserve “the melting pot” metaphor of American culture, where all difference is dissolved.

The six abayas used in the six video clips will be worn by live mannequins on opening night who can only communicate with each other by using typical Saudi gestures. The abayas later will be displayed on mannequins within my space in the gallery. Each mannequin will be wearing an abaya with its face veiled with its matching headscarf. The monitor will be playing the looped video depicting the abayas being used as a form of camouflage in a hyper-computerized space, which, sadly, is the only place where these modern versions of the veil can currently accepted as a reality.

³⁶ Mark Frank and Thomas Gilovich. "The Dark Side of Self-and Social Perception: Black Uniforms and Aggression in Professional Sports." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 1 (1988): 74.

The video document of *One of Us* can be viewed on the following website.

<http://farrahalsulaiman.com/>

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