QUANDARIES OF REPRESENTATION
MONA EL-GHOBASHY

In 2008, seventeen-year-old Samantha Elauf didn’t know she was making history when she applied for a job at Abercrombie & Fitch. Elauf was rated highly for the position by the assistant manager who interviewed her but was ultimately turned down because she, like many Muslim women, wears a hijab, or head scarf, and thus violated the company’s “Look Policy”. Seven years later, Elauf won her case against Abercrombie when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the retailer had discriminated against her on the basis of her religion. As Mona El-Ghobashy notes in this selection, the hijab is often a source of trouble for Muslim women in American society. Born in Cairo, Egypt, El-Ghobashy graduated from Columbia University with a Ph.D. in political science. She previously taught at Barnard College and is currently a visiting scholar at Columbia’s Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life. She has published articles in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, American Behavioral Scientist, and Middle East Report and is working on a book about contemporary Egyptian politics and popular movements. This article appeared in Arab and Arab American Feminisms (2011), edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber.

EVER SINCE I WAS FIFTEEN, I have been trailed by curiosity. Once in tenth grade, while waiting in my high school guidance counselor’s office, an elderly secretary got up from her desk and came over to where I was sitting to ask me, in a too-good-to-be-true New York accent, “Excuse me, deah, are you in religion?” Perfect strangers have been no less inquisitive about my head scarf. “Excuse me, does your family come from the Caucasus?” asked an extremely solicitous and almost apologetic fellow passenger on a New York City subway car several years ago. She seemed to slink away in embarrassment as I shook my head and smiled, and I remember thinking that her demeanor suggested an academic elated at identifying a potential research subject.

Now that I reflect on it, the subway has been an especially rich space for strangers to graft onto me their passions, queries, and memories. Once, as I sat impatiently in a delayed subway car on the way to college one late morning in the early 1990s, a young African American man abruptly took off his massive headphones and turned to me, “Excuse me, can I read you a poem?” “Okay,” I ventured hesitatingly, relieved that the train car was entirely empty save for him and me and a snoring man in the far corner. He unfolded a white piece of paper and began to passionately read its typed contents, an endearing ode to Malcolm X and
Martin Luther King Jr. Then he folded the paper and carefully returned it to his pocket, explaining to me how it was wrongheaded to argue which leader was better, that both of their strategies were needed and had their place. He looked at me intently for affirmation, and I nodded smilingly. “Thank you, sister,” he said, and then returned to complete absorption in the music piped through his headphones.

Once, in a subway car crammed with commuters returning home from work, an elderly Asian man got up from his seat and negotiated his way to where I sat. He leaned down to me and put his finger on the word “contrition” in the New York Times article he was reading. “Excuse me, can you explain to me the meaning of this word?” I was happy to oblige, as other passengers sneaked glances at us from behind their books and newspapers.

Once, on the N Train, an elderly olive-skinned man who had been eyeing me shyly gingerly volunteered that he was raised in Iran. I forced a polite smile; I was half-asleep and extremely fatigued from staying up all night to finish a paper. He said that he was Jewish, and that when he was a boy in Iran he memorized all of the Quran in school, and that his mother covered her head, “like you,” making a hand gesture that framed his face to mimic a head covering. Perhaps he sensed some doubt in my eyes, perhaps he could not resist reminiscing about his childhood, but he then reached for his black wallet and carefully pulled out a remarkably well-preserved, sepia-toned photograph of a young, angelic-looking woman in a white head scarf. I leaned forward to look at the photograph, which he delicately placed in my hand. Its rippled edges were only slightly creased, and I was overcome by its beauty. He was positively beaming at me, and I beamed back at him.

Other encounters can only be described as bizarre, ranging from annoying but harmless quotidian intrusions to darker experiences that every woman faces in slightly different forms. On the extremely snowy Christmas Day of 2002, I made my way to Queens to meet my best friend who was in town for a short visit. Lost in a neighborhood suddenly made unrecognizable by mounds of snow and shuttered storefronts, I ducked into the only open store, a drugstore, to ask for directions to the café where I was to meet her. As I asked the security guard for its whereabouts, a customer standing in line a few feet away called out, “But do you know how to read? Will you be able to read the street signs?” The security guard stopped talking in midsentence, and we both turned to look at the man’s smirking face in genuine puzzlement for several seconds, before it dawned on me that he was calling me illiterate. “You need to know how to read to figure out how to get there,” he persisted. Cashiers, customers juggling their purchases and dripping umbrellas, and the security guard all turned to me, and time seemed to stand still. I sputtered, “I’m studying for a Ph.D., you bigot,” and he retorted, “Yeah, well I have a law degree.” I turned and sped out of the store, fighting back tears as I inhaled the bracing winter air.
My head scarf also attracts attention in Egypt, where I was born and now frequently return to conduct research and interviews. “You look like that over there, or do you wear that just when you come here?” I’m constantly asked. My interlocutors are puzzled and sometimes impressed when they learn that I look the same in Cairo and New York. Some seem to think of it as a badge of honor, though I point out that it entails absolutely no bravery to be muhajjaba\textsuperscript{1} at an elite institution like Columbia in a hypercosmopolitan, novelty-friendly metropolis like New York. After September 11, 2001, almost everyone in Egypt asked worriedly, “How do they treat you over there? Is it really bad?”

I have not experienced any harassment, but instead an outpouring of touching concern from colleagues, friends, and even solicitous strangers. But many hundreds of Muslims in less rarefied circumstances have indeed had their lives turned upside down by September 11. In the immediate aftermath, the most that I had to worry about was how my students would perceive me, and whether I could maintain my composure and walk into class on September 13 to steer a discussion about an event I literally could not comprehend. Other Muslims, Sikhs, and non-Muslim Arabs contended with physical harm, verbal abuse, social ostracism, loss of livelihood, and government harassment.

Over the years, as the American government’s military and political intervention in the Middle East has intensified, the curiosity of others has honed in on my supposed exceptionalism. The vast majority of Muslim women are oppressed, goes the conventional wisdom, and I seem different. It must be because I live in “the West.” “You look so elegant, but would you be allowed to dress this way in Egypt?” a woman I didn’t know once asked. A perfect stranger sitting next to me on a flight from Cairo to New York tried to strike up a conversation by pointedly asking, “Do you always travel alone?” Instead of puncturing the widespread American conviction that all Muslim women are so downtrodden that they cannot dress freely (or elegantly) or travel alone, I am unwittingly deployed to confirm such certainties.

I have come to expect that, after delivering a public lecture on some aspect of politics in the Middle East, someone will invariably ask me a question about women and why they are so oppressed “in the Muslim world.” At one and the same time, I am turned into a sanitized “liberal Muslim woman” who speaks unaccented English but also a credible insider able to “explain” my coreligionists’ deplorable treatment of women. Equally revealing are the plaudits I receive for being “strong” and “articulate,” well before my interlocutor has had a chance to learn anything about my politics or preferences. I cannot help but think that such projections have much more to do with what others graft onto me than what I am and how I see myself. And so I am alternately amused and sobered by how others wish to package me.

\textsuperscript{1}muhajjaba: A woman who wears a hijab, or head scarf. [Eds.]
Lest I appear to be whiny or caviling, let me concede that there is a necessary amount of reduction in every quotidian transaction. Superficial cultural small talk is often serviceable in everyday conversation, particularly between strangers. Since I am identifiably Muslim because of my head scarf, it is inevitable that my appearance will become the subject of attention. As I wait to pick up clothes from the cleaner, it is entirely ordinary for the owner to make friendly conversation by referring to my head scarf and asking whether it means I come “from the Arab,” which segues into a comparison of the weather in South Korea and Egypt and how New York’s weather is really quite ideal because there are four distinct seasons, a discourse that ends with me claiming my cleaned clothes and the dry cleaner pleasantly wishing me a nice day.

Yet there remains a fine line between harmless everyday cultural interactions and the quandary of unwittingly being made to represent and somehow stand in for all Muslim women, everywhere, at all times. The task of representation entails negating the manifold stereotypes that stubbornly cling to Muslim women, a task I am reluctant to take on. As it was and continues to be for African American and Asian American women, the burden of deflecting stereotypes is especially acute for Muslim women at this historical juncture, buffeted as they are by unceasing attempts to “reform,” “liberate,” “uplift,” and “empower” them by a motley crew of individuals, institutions, and national governments. As an identifiably Muslim woman, I often feel torn between countering pernicious stereotypes and resisting the mantle of representation that battling stereotypes entails.

When I am called upon to speak from a Muslim, Arab, or Muslim female “perspective,” I always wonder: is there one Muslim/Arab/Muslim-female point of view? Do all Muslim women have the same positions on all issues, or even one single issue? I doubt that anyone would claim that Episcopalian or Reform Jewish or Catholic women have a single perspective, so why are millions or even thousands of Muslim women assumed to hold a uniform point of view? Muslim women are divided by national origin, generation, class status, level of religious observance, level of education, and political orientation. What is meant by statements such as “Muslim women are oppressed” or even “In general, Muslim women are unfree”? Conversely, it makes no sense to me to think that one person can be emblematic or representative of “Muslim women,” even if it is done positively, as when attempting to identify a spokeswoman or “positive role model” for Muslim women, such as former Turkish prime minister Tansu Çiller or former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto or Iranian human rights lawyer and Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi.

There is a reason to be suspicious of the zeal to represent Muslim women. I have in mind the cottage industry of instant celebrities and “public speakers” eager to speak about and for “Muslim women.” This sort of representational entrepreneurship is especially prevalent in the United States and countries in Europe with substantial Muslim minorities,
where every few years a Muslim woman is trotted out as an exemplary role model to her “sisters.” Inevitably, she is carefully packaged as a free-thinker and courageous gadfly eager to “speak the truth” to her coreligionists. Such entrepreneurs almost always adopt a lecturing, hectoring tone, speaking down to real Muslim women. They excoriate “Islam” for its oppression of women (sometimes its “Muslim men”) and demand that Muslims “speak out against the fundamentalism in our midst,” or some similar trope that is strategically deployed to launch lucrative careers as professional identity peddlers.

As is so common with disingenuous attempts to address “the community,” the audience for such self-appointed spokeswomen is not their community but the publishers, talk-show hosts, and think tanks eager for more sordid tales of the backwardness of Muslims and the oppression of Muslim women. Far from valiantly subverting stereotypes, such manufactured missionaries are deeply invested in upholding stereotypes, confirming the comforting belief that Muslims are a benighted lot, incapable of any positive action and clinging to not a single redeeming value. So they must wait for the brave missionary to come and save them from themselves. Without the stereotype, the entrepreneurs have no traction.

Self-anointed representatives are a far cry from people with more modest and truer aspirations, those individuals who work away from the limelight, who live and work among the communities they seek to empower, who understand the sociological structures and intricate layers of inequality that ensnare Muslim and non-Muslim women alike. I cannot help but recall Virginia Woolf’s cutting words, no less true today than when she published them in 1938:

Money is not the only baser ingredient. Advertisement and publicity are also adulterers. Thus, culture mixed with personal charm, or culture mixed with advertisement and publicity, are also adulterated forms of culture. We must ask you to abjure them; not to appear on public platforms; not to lecture; not to allow your private face to be published, or details of your private life; not to avail yourself, in short, of any of the forms of brain prostitution which are so insidiously suggested by the pimps and panders of the brain-selling trade; or to accept any of those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified—medals, honors, degrees—we must ask you to refuse them absolutely, since they are all tokens that culture has been prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into captivity.


I do not share Woolf’s suspicion of all institutions, but I wholeheartedly identify with her aversion to loud publicity seeking and self-promotion, the sort of entrepreneurship and scramble for representation now routine when it comes to “Muslim women.”

Any organized attempts to reduce Muslim women, whether ones that seek to “represent” them or ones that seek to “liberate” them or both, ignore the variation in their life circumstances. Some Muslim women are indeed downtrodden; others are not. Those Muslim women who are oppressed are oppressed in different ways and for different reasons. The same goes for those Muslim women who are emancipated. A genuine concern with diagnosing and alleviating oppression must grapple with unsexy sociological facts and political dynamics that do not make for good copy or riveting confessional narratives. Serious students of gender oppression tackle the variation head-on; hawks of Muslim women’s oppression smother inconvenient facts to serve their agendas.

On a more rarefied plane, attempts to represent or speak for Muslim women by definition must mute their unique selves. Real Muslim and Arab women are extraordinarily diverse. . . . Like other human beings, they are fraught with ambiguity, contradiction, and inconsistency. I understand the need to suppress idiosyncrasy for purposes of sociological classification and policy intervention for poverty alleviation or literacy promotion, but I do not trust the zeal to flatten Muslim women’s diversity by self-appointed spokeswomen and overnight do-gooders.

Each Muslim woman is an irreducible self, capable of speaking on her own behalf. When conceptualizing the self, I find myself returning again and again to Edward Said’s final words in his beautiful memoir, Out of Place, where he ruminates on the multiple sources of the self:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is.4

**ENGAGING THE TEXT**

1. El-Ghobashy describes numerous encounters with strangers — on the subway in New York, on the plane from Egypt, and after her lectures. Choose two or three of these to analyze. What do the people she meets assume about

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El-Ghobashy, and how do they (mis)interpret her head scarf? What stereotypes do they have about Muslim women in general or about Muslim women in America?

2. What distinction does El-Ghobashy make between “harmless everyday cultural interactions” and “pernicious stereotypes” (para. 11)?

3. Why is El-Ghobashy reluctant to battle the many stereotypes of Muslim women that she encounters? In what ways does her essay subvert such stereotypes?

4. Why would “publishers, talk-show hosts, and think tanks” be “eager for more sordid tales of the backwardness of Muslims and the oppression of Muslim women” (para. 14)? What personal, political, and economic motives might they have to promote such beliefs?

5. Thinking Rhetorically El-Ghobashy acknowledges that her privilege as an academic at an Ivy League school makes her experience atypical. How does this relative privilege affect the rhetorical choices she makes in the essay? She notes that hundreds of “other Muslims, Sikhs, and non-Muslim Arabs contended with physical harm, verbal abuse, social ostracism, loss of livelihood, and government harassment” in the wake of 9/11 (para. 7). Would her essay have more authority if she had endured some of these difficulties? Why or why not?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

6. In their discussion of racialization, Linda Holtzman and Leon Sharpe (p. 599) note that following 9/11 there was “widespread racialization of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent” (p. 601). To what extent can the stereotypes of Muslim women that El-Ghobashy describes be attributed to racialization?
7. How would each woman in the cartoon on page 487 explain her assumptions about the other? What is the cartoonist, Malcolm Evans, suggesting about male-dominated cultures? Given that the humor of this cartoon relies on stereotypes, do you think El-Ghobashy would approve of it or not, and why?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

8. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, more than two-thirds of women who wear a hijab reported that they had experienced discrimination. Do some online research to learn more about the kinds of bias Muslim women face because of their appearance. What cases have recently been litigated? What were the circumstances of each case, and what was the outcome? Write up your findings and report them to the class.

9. If you have ever consciously attempted to disprove a stereotype about a group that you’re a part of, write a journal entry describing that experience. Why did you feel the need to refute the stereotype, how did you go about combating it, and what was the result of your efforts, if any?

“TWO WAYS A WOMAN CAN GET HURT”:
ADVERTISING AND VIOLENCE
JEAN KILBOURNE

Most of us like to think of ourselves as immune to the power of ads — we know that advertisers use sex to get our attention and that they make exaggerated claims about a product’s ability to make us attractive, popular, and successful. Because we can see through these subtle or not-so-subtle messages, we assume that we’re too smart to be swayed by them. But Jean Kilbourne argues that ads affect us in far more profound and potentially damaging ways. The way that ads portray bodies — especially women’s bodies — as objects conditions us to see each other in dehumanizing ways, thus “normalizing” attitudes that can lead to sexual aggression. Kilbourne (b. 1946) has spent most of her professional life teaching and lecturing about the world of advertising. She has produced award-winning documentaries on images of women in ads (Killing Us Softly, Slim Hopes) and tobacco advertising (Pack of Lies). She has also been a member of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and has twice served as an adviser to the surgeon general of the United States. Currently she serves on the Massachusetts Governor’s Commission...