

Spring 2011

Eroticism and Vandalism: NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab on the Burqa Ban in France

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Women and Gender Studies

April 1, 2011

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NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab on the Burqa Ban in France

Abstract: The performative protests, NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab, mount opposition to France's most recent legislation against veiling in the public sphere—the burqa ban that will go into effect on April 11, 2011. NiqaBitch explicitly confronts the justification provided by the French government that defers to the preservation of the republic and its foundational principles. In the viral video, the NiqaBitches strut around the streets of France in hot pants and niqabs. Their method “de-dramatizes” the debate, but also has the effect of generating a hyper-sexualized notion of the veil through which the veil may become palatable to French sensibilities. The sexualization of the veil is also where the protest gains radical import by disrupting the resistance/subordination binary through which Western feminists assess the lives of Other women. The graffiti of Princess Hijab also disrupts this model by inversion. She presents veiling as the privileged form of conduct and exposes the oppressiveness of Western capitalism and exhibitionism inherent in “open” gender systems. Her art expresses an anti-assimilation sentiment and a more essential interrogation of the status of the veil in French society.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Introduction to French Legislation Against Veiling	6
3. Discourses of the Burqa Ban and ‘Other’ Women	6
4. Media Protests Addressing the Burqa Ban	16
4.1 NiqaBitch	16
4.2 Princess Hijab	27
5. Conclusion	40
Works Cited	42

1. Introduction

On October 7, 2010, France passed a law that will make it illegal to wear the burqa or the niqab in public. The law will go into effect on April 11, 2011 and will be punished with a fine of 150 Euros and/or a citizenship course. Additionally, the law made it illegal to force women to wear a burqa or niqab in public. Violation of this sanction is punishable with a year in prison and a 30,000 Euro fine; however, if the victim is a minor the fine doubles and adds an additional year to the prison sentence. In an official statement made by the French government, the burqa and niqab are cited as, “a new form of enslavement that the republic cannot accept on its soil” (CNN Wire Staff). Security reasons have also been cited as a secondary concern. It is important to note that the subject of concern is not the woman who is being “enslaved,” rather it is the republic. The national motto of France, “*Liberté, égalité, fraternité,*” canonizes the ideals of the French republic and infuses French political discourse. In that discourse, one must belong first and foremost to the nation. According to Joan Scott in *The Politics of the Veil*, national identity trumps any group affiliation. In order to achieve this, French citizenship is modeled on abstract individualism, which takes the individual as the essential human being. All signs of difference are abstracted from the individual, including religion, ethnicity, and race. When such traits are abstracted in the public sphere, the French notion of equality may be achieved by virtue of the sameness or homogeneity of the people (Scott 11, 13, 87). Through French political discourse, the burqa and the niqab become signs that demarcate difference and represent a refusal to assimilate into French society. Veils are symbols of difference that are supposedly incompatible with the French notion of equality, abstract individualism, universalism, anti-communalism, and secularism.

The discussion of veiling in France did not begin with the burqa ban. In Section I of this

paper, I discuss the penultimate ban on conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools, revealing that bans against signs of religious affiliation in the public sphere serve as symbolic messages. Due to the symbolic nature of the bans, their justification does not lie in a set of tangible data. Instead, France sets forth the principles of the republic to grant legitimacy to its legislation. However, as I demonstrate in Section II, it becomes clear that there is a myriad of discourses that contribute to the motivations for prohibiting veiling in the public sphere in France. In Section III, I examine two recent examples of performative protest that interact with these discourses. The two performances I will explore are NiqaBitch, a viral video of two women strutting down the streets of Paris in niqabs and hot-pants, and the artwork of Princess Hijab, an anonymous guerilla graffiti artist who “hijabizes” Western media advertisements on the Paris metro. Their performances mount protests that respond to the political and cultural climate in France that has allowed for the creation of the burqa ban. Both oppose the ban; however, the differing discourses generated through their performances bring into being opposing sentiments about the significance of the veil and its place within French society. The work of NiqaBitch, although well intended, fails to connect with the grim effects that the ban will have on veiled Muslim women in France. It has the radical import of destabilizing the resistance/subordination binary by which many Western feminists assess the lives of Other women, but the protest has a fundamental flaw in its hyper-sexualization of the veil. Princess Hijab, despite the fact that she is a criminal who vandalizes public property on the metro, mounts a more effective form of protest. Her artwork presents a more radical interpretation of the debate and allows for a progressive stance towards veiling in French society.

2. Introduction to French Legislation Against Veiling

France began to discuss prohibiting public school girls from wearing the veil in the late 1980s. The debate continued and gained momentum, resulting in the first climactic decision made on March 15, 2004. The French government passed a law that banned wearing “conspicuous signs” of religious affiliation in public schools. Article 1 of the ban states, “In public elementary, middle and high schools, the wearing of signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest students’ religious affiliation is prohibited. Disciplinary procedures to implement this rule will be preceded by a discussion with the student” (Scott 1). The definition of what counts as “conspicuous” is vague, but it may include large crosses, veils, and skullcaps. These more visible signs are prohibited whereas more discrete signs of religious affiliation are tolerated; these include medallions, small crosses, stars of David, hands of Fatima, or small Korans. Scott argues that the inclusion of other overt signs of religious affiliation in the ban was to guard against charges of discrimination against Muslims. However, the intent of the prohibition was to reach Muslim girls who veil (Scott 1, 2). Prior to the public school headscarf ban, only 14 percent of Muslim women in France polled wore the hijab with 51 percent declaring that they actively practice their religion (Scott 3). Due to the small number of women who veil in France, the ban affects relatively few—and thus, it is correct to interpret the ban primarily as a symbolic gesture.

3. Discourses of the Burqa Ban and ‘Other’ Women

The foundational principles of the French Republic are presented as the primary justification for banning the veil. One threat to French nationalist ideology is *communautarisme*, which refers to the priority of a group identity over national identity. One either belongs to a group or to the

nation; a hyphenated ethnic/national identity is not possible within the French paradigm of citizenship. In French political theory, equality is said to be achieved through denial or rendering irrelevant one's social, religious, or ethnic origins in the public sphere (Scott 11). One becomes a French citizen as an abstract individual; all signs of difference must be disembodied from a person in public. And through this, the French ideal of universalism, the homogeneity of all peoples under the Republic may be achieved—the antithesis of communalism.

The burqa and the niqab are visible signs of a group identity. Since only a small portion of Muslim women in France veil, their visibility is heightened in the public sphere—these women stand out more, despite the intention of many wearers to embody modesty or piety. In French political discourse, the “difference” that is supposedly signified through veiling threatens the homogeneity of French society. France holds a heavy premium on assimilation, embracing the same language, culture, history, and political history. Such sameness is an abstraction: “a philosophical notion meant to achieve the formal equality of individuals before the law. But historically it has been applied literally: assimilation means the eradication of difference” (Scott 12). One manifestation of this ideology in practice is contained within the French census, which makes no record of the religion, ethnicity, or national origin of its population.

The heavy premium on assimilation and the anti-immigrant sentiment in France are major contributors to the momentum that legislation banning the veil in public has gained. In France, the debate surrounding the “issue” of young women wearing the Islamic headscarf erupted at three distinct moments in French history, namely in 1989, 1994—both prior to the widely publicized attacks on the World Trade Center—and in 2003. The sequence neither reflects an increase in young women donning the veil in schools nor an increase in disruptive behavior by these women. Rather it corresponds to the mounting political influence of the anti-immigrant far

right (Scott 21). The *affaires des foulards* began in October 3, 1989 and led to the expulsion of three Muslim girls who refused to remove their headscarves upon instruction. The demographic of the school was highly diverse, yielding a high level of class, religious, and ethnic tension. The diversity in the school served as an impetus for the decision, which was aimed at assimilation of students. Many argue that banning the veil is a necessary means to fully assimilate Muslims into French society (Scott 24). Beyond the goal of assimilation, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in France fueled the prohibition. The incident occurred during a period of increasing unease about the place of North African immigrants and their children, as well as international attention to Islam and Arab militancy. The anxiety about France's second largest religion, Islam, intensified with the Iranian ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the start of the first Palestinian intifada against the Israeli occupation in 1987, and national concern surrounding the emergence of a few small militant Islamist groups in France (Scott 22-3). The next two prohibitions against veiling in public schools also followed this reactionary model, demonstrating the inextricable link between bans on veiling and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The legislation has established the intention of lawmakers to keep France a unified nation, which is especially important with their entrance into the European Union (Scott 2). Nation-states want to defend and preserve their national identities and sovereignty when being subsumed under the European Union (Scott 7). Other aspects of French political discourse that are frequently cited as justification are the importance of the separation of church and state, secularism, and faith in the projects of modernity. The projects of modernity are challenged by the common perceptions of Islam, which is considered as a backward, overly traditional, anti-progressive, and having the power to corrupt the projects of 'the secular' and 'the modern.' Many view the veil as the ultimate symbol of Islam's resistance to modernity (Scott 7).

The basis of the ban against conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools is directly related to the foundational principle of *laïcité*, the French version of secularism. Secularism in France differs from the notion of secularism implemented in the United States' political discourse. In the United States, secularism connotes the protection of religions from interference by the state; whereas in France, *laïcité* means the separation of church and state whereby the individual is protected from the claims of *religion* by the state (Scott 15). "The ban on headscarves established the intention of legislators to keep France a unified nation: secular, individualist, and culturally homogenous" (Scott 15).

Defending the principles of the French Republic does not adequately explain the preoccupation and controversy around the Muslim headscarf. The veil has become the symbol of the "problem of Islam" for the French republic, despite the inability of the veil to encapsulate the range of Islamophobia in the West (Scott 21). There are other visible signs of difference attached to the Western collective imaginary and perception of many religious Muslims. Muslim men are frequently believed to be asserting their religious and political views, rooted in difference, with their appearance and behavior. Muslim men often have prominent beards and wear loose clothing. Other markers of Muslim religious and political views, such as prayers, food preferences, and open assertions of religious identity tied to activist politics, are not prohibited along with the veil (Scott 4). This may be due to the infeasibility of enforcing a ban against beards and/or loose clothing. But more likely, it results from the Western belief in the need to save brown women from brown men (Spivak 92). Most Western nations share France's unease with Islam and veiling, in addition to this imperialistic mentality. This sentiment is directly explicated in the November 17, 2002 radio address to the United States given by the first lady Laura Bush in regards to the U.S. "War on Terror":

I'm delivering this week's radio address to kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban . . . Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us . . . Fighting brutality against women and children . . . is the acceptance of our common humanity . . . The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women. (Bush)

The United States' "War on Terror" justified itself by purporting to liberate Muslim women from the Taliban. It set up the United States as "the civilized people" who need act in the name of "our common humanity" to save Muslim women from dangerous brown Muslim men. Muslim men are reduced to a monolithic Other—uncivilized, backwards, Taliban-terrorist, and oppressor of women and children. Laura Bush's speech reiterated the division between the West and the East/Others. Members of the West are "the civilized." And by virtue of their membership to the West and their civility, they are granted freedom and agency, which compel them to save the women of the East from brown men. The speech also explicitly stated that these brown men are dangerous to the West, providing another rallying point for "The War on Terror."

The speech enlisted women to justify American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan. Saving women and children is not accomplished through increased military presence, which typically halts humanitarian aid and increases internal violence. It is a rhetorical

tool used to divert the public's attention away from the true goals and realities created through military intervention. This mirrors France's bans on veiling. Both employ the rhetoric of saving women to legitimate their action and divert attention away from the more controversial motivations and implications of state action. Legislation against veiling is not saving women from the oppressiveness of the veil. It uses the rhetoric of saving women as a guise so that the true motivation may remain obscure. The ban is a response to the "problem of Islam" to French society. Women and children are constructed categories used to justify "saving" due to the normative conception of them as vulnerable and in need of the protection of state intervention. The French ban is in response to the veil as, "a new form of enslavement that the republic cannot accept on its soil" (CNN Wire Staff). In this statement, the emphasis is on the importance of the republic hidden behind concern for liberating women, as the United States hides its ulterior motives for military intervention behind Afghan and Iraqi women.

Another reason hidden behind the instrumental claim to be liberating women that helps to elucidate the Western obsession with the plight of Muslim women is the Islamaphobia generated by fear of fundamentalist groups who openly denounce and threaten Western, Christian values. These anxieties are exacerbated by the proliferation of media coverage and the fear generated by the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," Lila Abu-Lughod comments on the numerous invitations she received to speak to reporters on the topic of women and Islam after the September 11, 2001 attacks: "what is striking about these...ideas for new programs is that there was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual would help one to understand" (Abu-Lughod 784). It is inappropriate to place "neat cultural icons" over complicated historical and

political narratives (Abu-Lughod 785). The veil in Western discourses has been reduced to a signifier of lack of agency. This does not address the heterogeneous nature of the lived experiences of women who veil. In the West, even among many Western feminists, there is too much dogmatic faith in secular humanism without consideration of the complex possibilities of human projects undertaken in different traditions (Abu-Lughod 788).

The Muslim headscarf is not and should not be considered synonymous with oppression. This assumption is fueled and created in the Western imaginary through the models of dupes and prisoners of patriarchy as discussed by Uma Narayan in, "Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women." The "prisoner of patriarchy" model results from someone, say an American university student, imagining herself as the person she currently is with all the imprints of her social location, values, beliefs, and perspectives in the situation of an Other. The context of the Other may be one where she is subjected to veiling, purdah, arranged marriage, or another foreign custom. To this American student, endorsing or accepting these practices seems inconceivable, and thus she imagines the Other in the same terms (Narayan 418). In the prisoner of patriarchy model one imagines that the Other's responses must be identical to one's own. And thus the Other must have various forms of patriarchal oppression imposed on her entirely against her will and consent, similar to the way a prisoner is constrained of her or his liberty. In the "dupe of patriarchy" model, patriarchal violence is virtually self-imposed; the woman's attitudes are envisioned as entirely shaped by the dominant patriarchal values. In the prisoner of patriarchy model, the veil is entirely imposed on the woman, and in the dupe of patriarchy model, she veils because she completely endorses all aspects of the practice (Narayan 419).

Neither of these models allows for Westerners to consider the emancipatory power of the

veil and/or how some of their own cultural practices are similar to veiling. An example is makeup. Both makeup and veiling convey symbolic messages about a woman's social status, her ability to enter or work in the public sphere, and her position as a sexualized entity. Many women who wear makeup, as many women who veil, do not centrally experience it as a form of patriarchal oppression (Narayan 421). Often, if not always, it is necessary to “bargain with patriarchy,” whereby agency may be enacted through compliance to patriarchal structures (Narayan 421). The decisions many women make with respect to “cultural practices” should be understood as a choice of a “bundle of elements,” some of which they want and some of which they do not, and where they lack the power to “undo the bundle” so as to choose only those desirable elements. When addressing women's compliances with “cultural practices,” it is important for feminists to maintain a dual awareness—seeing both how the practice imposes constraints on choices and how choices are in fact being made within these constraints (Narayan 422). The prisoner and dupe stereotypes about Other women allow for generalizations that most often underestimate the significance of the cultural practices and the agency of women who engage in such practices, while overestimating the level of coercion involved in compliance (Narayan 431).

Saba Mahmood shares a similar concern as Narayan regarding the Western tendency to underestimate the significance of cultural practices and the autonomy employed by Other women. In *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood identifies part of the problem in the privilege granted to humanist agency in Western liberal and progressive discourse. The dominant Western conception of agency is humanist agency—the capacity to realize one's own interest in face of individual or collective obstacles presented by custom or tradition (Mahmood 9). Faced with a threat to one's perceived autonomy, the

humanist desire for autonomy or self-expression sparks acts of resistance. The goal of ‘resistance’ in Western feminist thought is for women to free themselves from relations of subordination to patriarchal structures. Desire for this mode of freedom is universalized through its privileged position in Western liberal and progressive discourse; it is naturalized and established as a normative goal of feminism and liberalism more generally (Mahmood 10).

Mahmood finds this model unable to explain the experiences of Other women, namely the women she studied in the piety movement during the Islamic Revival in Egypt. “The desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject” (Mahmood 223). Women work within the patriarchal structures of Islam to develop virtues that they find important to the cultivation of self, namely piety. They don the veil not due to coercion, but rather through close analysis of the Koran and reinterpretation of texts “Each individual [in the piety movement] must interpret the moral codes, in accord with traditional guidelines, in order to discover how she, as an individual, may best realize the divine plan for her life” (Mahmood 30). Ordinary women, not just male religious scholars, debate theological and doctrinal issues (Mahmood 55). To the Muslim women Mahmood studied, the meaning of the veil is not exhausted by its significance as a sign of civilization, culture, or identity, but rather it encompasses an entire way of being and acting that is learned through the practice of veiling (Mahmood 56).

The veil is often understood as a necessary means through which the virtue of piety is cultivated. It may be understood in terms of Aristotelian habituation, whereby morality is both realized through and manifested in outward behavioral forms (Mahmood 25). “Women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner

states (intentions, movements of desire thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gesture, actions, speech, etc.)” (Mahmood 31). The women in the piety movement reinvent the meaning of the veil (as a symbol) for their own practical purposes, and this displays their agency. Mahmood’s research radically challenges the normative Western binary of resistance/subordination employed by many feminists. This binary is overly simplistic and only grants agency to instances when norms are questioned. It does little to address the significance of norms and the work they do beyond the register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject (Mahmood 22). The binary creates two options. Either a woman resists patriarchal structures and qualifies as an agent, or she does not and is necessarily subordinated and stripped of her autonomy. It is unable to address the range and variability of human experience.

In light of the ethnographic and theoretical work of Lila Abu-Lughod, Uma Narayan, and Saba Mahmood, it is clear that the veil plays a crucial role in the lives of Muslim women who veil. Although some women in France who veil due to coercive forces may view the burqa ban as a positive advancement in their lives and/or a necessary step to assimilate into the French society, this does not exhaust the registers of impact that the burqa ban will have on veiled Muslim women in France. Many Muslim women in France will feel a crisis of identity. For those who believe the veil to be a necessary means through which their subjectivity is constituted, self-fulfillment will be denied. Others will feel their cultural and religious heritage degraded. Many will not want to leave the home out of sheer discomfort. The veil for Muslim women has allowed for their entrance into the public sphere—the realm of occupational, educational, and social opportunities. The burqa ban will deny these opportunities to many women. The grave realities that the burqa ban will create for veiled Muslim women in France

appear irrelevant in comparison to the French goal of preserving the foundational principles of the republic.

Fundamental problems with the burqa ban are explored in the performative protests of NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab. In the next section, I will examine these two examples of performative protests that operate in clear opposition to the burqa ban. These protests bring into being conceptions of the veil that are not simply synonymous with oppression. They expose realities and symbols of the veil that are counter-normative to the claims made by the French republic. The discourses brought into being through their protests have radical potential for social and political transformation.

4. Media Protests Addressing the Burqa Ban

The media-based protests of NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab both express opposition to the burqa ban in France. Both negotiate and interrogate the different strands of discourse around the issue of veiling in France, but they do so through different means and to different ends. Through examination of NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab, it becomes clear that the realities and symbols of the veil and veiled women in France cannot be reduced to a simple theoretical framework. Ultimately, the artwork of Princess Hijab expresses a more essential interrogation of the burqa ban and the veil in French society.

4.1 NiqaBitch

The viral video, NiqaBitch, is a protest against the burqa ban in France. The performance of NiqaBitch has radical potential in its refusal to fit within the resistance/subordination binary.

However, its radical import does not far exceed this abstract notion. It demonstrates the incompatibility of “open” and “covered” systems of gender relations, painting a grim picture for the status of veiled Muslim women in France. It creates a story whereby the only means through which the veil may become more palatable to French society is through hyper-sexualization.

NiqaBitch was first released in October 2010. The two women who star in the video are political science and communication majors in their mid twenties. It has been reported that one of the two women is Muslim; however, their race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and nationality may still be left to question (Samuel). The video revolves around the two women walking down streets in Paris. This would be a mundane sight if it were not for their attire of hot pants and a niqab. The niqab maintains the performers’ anonymity. But the niqab coupled with hot pants gives them a clear identity as the NiqaBitches. The video begins with the two strutting down the street side by side. The camera then leaves the images of the women and lowers into a close-up shot of their feet adorned with black strappy high heels. The next image in the series is their logo “NiqaBitch.” The lettering is bold black with a border of neon pink. The logo is centered between two images, also in black and bordered in neon pink. On the right is a stiletto boot and to the left there is a woman with her legs exposed jumping into the air while wearing the niqab. Behind the image is the same neon pink fading into the black edging of the image. The video then turns back to the women, and the viewer sees them walking away from the camera. The video quality is poor and bordered with the same neon pink as used on the introductory image. On the side of the border, the image of the woman jumping in the niqab is repeated.



(Niqabitch).

The two women walk around the streets of Paris during the 2 minute and 18 second video and physically confront the state. The video follows the NiqaBitches as they pose in front of buildings that represent the French republic. The two women are pictured waving in front of the Socialist Party Headquarters (“Le siège du parti socialiste”), The Ministry of Defense (“Ministère de la Défense”), and the Prime Minister’s Center for Strategic Analysis (“Centre d’analyse stratégique du premier ministre”). They walk to these buildings with purpose and power in their strides. They are explicitly interrogating the burqa ban and the French republic in their performance. The connection forged between the NiqaBitches and the state appears harmless. The women stand in front of the buildings and pose for pictures, waving their hands in a friendly manner. Their performative brings into being a conception of the niqab that does not harm the French republic. But it also highlights another flaw in the formulation of the burqa ban. Their interaction may not be viewed as “harmless” when considering the purpose of laïcité, secularism, and the potential corruption of religion that these NiqaBitches face, according to the principle of laïcité. Their performatives also point to the futility or the unfeasibility of upholding the principles of laïcité—the state is not protecting these individuals from the claims of religion.

Rather the state is represented as a passive entity with no relation to the reality of these French streets and their occupants. This implies a disconnection between the state and French society, whereby the state may be viewed as ineffectual in achieving the aims of the burqa ban.

The NiqaBitches appear as if they are familiar with the area, getting to each location with ease, until they must stop to look at a map. We can infer that they were unfamiliar with the next building on their journey, The Ministry of Immigration and National Identity (“Ministere de L’immigration et de L’identité nationale”). From this, the audience can gather that these women have never had the need to visit this building, and thus denoting their non-immigrant roles in the skit. They are asserting themselves as French citizens who may wear the niqab, indicating their view that the niqab does not and should not strip women of their French citizenship. Another interpretation of their interaction with the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity may be taken—that their use of the map was to alter the pace of the video to add emphasis to their visit to the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. Either interpretation shows that significance of the women at the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity is to question one legitimating claim made about the burqa ban, namely that its goal is to fully assimilate Muslim women into French society.

Although their intent may have been to radically examine the issue of the veil as related to French assimilation, the effects of their skit were far less radical. When considering the reactions of onlookers in their performance, the niqab linked with hot pants does not elicit the same response as a woman walking down the streets in a niqab and other modest clothing. The onlookers find the NiqaBitches amusing; they wave and ask for photos. They appear unthreatened by *these* women wearing the niqab in public. The reactions they receive are positive, compared to the reactions that the average veiled Muslim woman in France receives.

The NiqaBitches are presenting an image of the veil that is more comfortable to French society. They are showing a way that veiled women and French society can co-exist, and thus they are advocating for a more inclusive stance towards assimilation.

The mixed opinions about the NiqaBitches held by the two police personnel in front of the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity demonstrate that the ban in theory and in practice are distinct and that officers of the republic are not in consensus over the matter. One policeman tells the NiqaBitches to go elsewhere, while the policewoman appears delighted by their clothing, “I love your outfit, is it to do with the new law?” To which one of the NiqaBitches replies, “Yes, we want to de-dramatize the situation.” The policewoman remarks of their brilliance and asks to take a photo (Samuel). This policewoman will soon be required to fine public niqab wearers but finds their spectacle to be fascinating, at least on a superficial level. The scene is ironic, and through irony the women are able to highlight the absurd nature of the ban. The NiqaBitches are using a dramatic performance to “de-dramatize” the debate.



(NiqaBitch).

Their protest may be conceived as radical insofar as it refuses to fit neatly into the dominant Western feminist model of the resistance/subordination binary: either you resist patriarchal norms and structures or you are being subordinated and your autonomy is put up for question. By mounting a more or less effective protest that does not fit this conventional model, they are exposing the flaws in how Westerners assess the autonomy of Other women. Their performance interacts with the binary in a complicated way. Through analysis of the ways in which it straddles the binary instead of choosing a side, some of the flaws in their protest also come to light, namely their hyper-sexualization of the veil. Paradoxically, this flaw also serves as a means to destabilize the problematic binary.

The two students say that their protest is an act of resistance, used to provoke legislators. And in accord with this intention, the video screams “resistance!” demonstrated by the song playing throughout the video. The chorus of which is “And if you don’t like it, then hey fuck you!” But is that really resistance or a childish chant that trivializes the potential power of their message? Their skit has a strong power to attract the gaze of onlookers, and to “de-dramatize” the debate, and thus achieves their intent. Insofar as these women were not coerced into the creation of their protest and the content of their message, we can see agency enacted. However, it is unclear if such agency is enacted in the “resistance” pole of the binary. The way in which they ‘strut’ in a niqab, a piece of clothing that is often viewed with disdain in French culture, shows resistance to Western attitudes toward the veil. But the discourse of their protest does not fit comfortably in either side of the binary.

The video slips between being an act of resistance and a mode of subordination through sexual objectification. The performance risks suggesting that the best way for the duo to render the niqab palatable to the French visual sphere is by fetishizing and eroticizing it. Throughout

the video, men gawk at the two performers and ask them to pose for pictures. As the video comes winding to an end, the camera does a close-up on the women's legs as they walk and then moves the frame to show a man watching from the back of a garbage truck. This moment also evokes the stereotype of working class masculinity and screams of the traditional notion of construction workers 'cat-calling' women as they walk past. The icon choices do not help much in trying to make this skit more than a new type of sexualization of the niqab. And it is suggested that through sexualization comes liberation—represented in the icon of the veiled woman with bare legs jumping in jubilation. The neon letters in the introductory image and the neon icon on the bottom right corner of the screen evoke the imagery and aesthetic of a strip club sign. Their exposed legs, high heels, music choice, and even the name, “Niqabitch,” are intuitively sexual. And thus despite their intentions, the protest fetishizes the veil by attaching it to their half bare bodies. The protest provides no articulation for veiled women who may in fact be wearing it for other reasons that are arguably more significant, such as the cultivation of virtues or cultural preservation. The video makes the veil “sexy” in the Western conception of the word. It brings into being a discourse that is both a mode of resistance and subordination. In this way, the video straddles the line between resistance and subordination. This gives the protest the radical import of disrupting the dominant model by which the lives of Other women are assessed by Western feminists.

When asked by Henry Samuel of the Telegraph, the two women explained that they intended to see “how would the authorities react when faced with women wearing a burqa and mini-shorts?...We were not looking to attack or degrade the image of Muslim fundamentalists – each to their own – but rather to question politicians who voted for this law that we consider clearly unconstitutional...To dictate what we wear appears to have become the role of the State

(as if they didn't have other fish to fry...)" (Samuel). Their protest is tongue-and-cheek as a means to bring the debate down to the level of a controversy over clothing, and not a symbolic cultural/religious battle. This tone that the video takes makes the niqab seem less frightening. It normalizes the niqab through coupling it with hot pants, a Western symbol of women's equality and sexual emancipation. This robs the veil of its religious, political, historical, and cultural power. And more importantly, the film trades in imagery of pornography in order to make the veil more palatable. It makes the "neat cultural icon" even more simplistic—to the level of mere clothing—an intent that they explicitly express (Abu-Lughod 785).

Reducing the veil to a *mere* article of clothing does not dig deep enough into the importance of clothing as related to the French notion of equality and the oppositional systems of gender relations that the controversy tries to mediate. French gender relations may involve what sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar calls an "open" approach to gender relations. In such a model, visibility of the female body is a marker of equality. And it is true that "open" systems have granted women in the Western world some measure of formal equality. Nonetheless, the language of the body is that of accessibility to the other sex. And in the "open" version of gender relations, "voyeurism and exhibitionism" are positively valued (Scott 155). Furthermore in this form of gender relations, men confirm their sexuality through their ability to see the female body, openly desire it, with the concurrence of women responding to their gaze by looking back in return (Scott 155-167). Scott argues that French equality has become synonymous with sexual emancipation, which in turn was equated with the visibility of the female body.

The "covered" gender system when employed in France does not afford women the same equality. Sexuality in the "covered" approach to gender relations is regulated by codes of modesty, related to visibility: beards for men and veils for women. Modesty and honor are

defined in a direct relation to the “covering” of the female body. Scott cites Abdellah Hammoudi and a commentary by Saba Mahmood for the claim that women are seen as the “shield of honor” for the community, managers of the private space—one closed off from the public. “For Muslims, the veil is a declaration of the need to curb the dangerous sexuality of women (and also men)” (Scott 154). Since the purity of the family and social body at large is dependent on the separation of the sexes in the “covered” gender relations in many Muslim communities, the veil has been emancipatory insofar as it had allowed women to enter the public sphere. In the veil controversy, “for young Muslim girls in France it was their own bodily integrity, their own honor, that was at stake” (Scott 155). Women ought to hide their charms and deny the excitement incited in men. Modest dress is to prevent such excitement and to preserve the proper functioning of the community, culture, and politics. The importance of dress to both French and Muslim societies is lost in the NiqaBitch protest, but it does allow for a discussion of the potential compatibility of the two systems of gender relations.

The viral video may also be seen as a performative that calls into being a hybrid of “open” and “covered” gender systems that may have the power to denaturalize these discourses. The two systems appear to be mutually exclusive when one considers why Muslim women wearing the veil stand out more in public with other women in Western dress whose clothing is more revealing. The veil makes these women more discrete insofar as their bodies are covered. But then how do we find such a reversal—why is there this contradiction in visibility? Scott argues that “Muslim modesty is taken to be sexually aberrant by French observers, who condemn it and not only as different but as somehow excessive (ostentatious, conspicuous), even perverse” (Scott 153). This is glaringly apparent in the NiqaBitch protest where the veil is hyper-sexualized. The veil within French society is “sexually aberrant,” and when coupled with hot

pants, the NiqaBitches make the sexuality of the veil hyper-erotic, similar to a spectacle that may be seen in a strip club.

The NiqaBitches are intentionally conflating the two gender systems in their protest. They attempt to embody a hybrid of the two gender systems through their use of dress. However ultimately, the women fall within the framework of an “open” system of gender relations. The top portions of their bodies are covered, and this denies the male gaze to a certain extent. However, the women wave to onlookers and consent to being the objects of pictures. Insofar as they behave in this manner, they are returning the male gaze that has been incited by their protest. They also conform to the exhibitionism and voyeurism implicit to open gender systems through their strip club-like performance, readily posing half-naked for catcalling construction workers. Because they both reject and allow the male gaze, there is the potential of their skit to represent a hybrid of the two systems—showing that they may not in fact be mutually exclusive. There is incredible political and social potential in being able to unite the two gender systems of relations; however, if this was their aim, they failed. Their performance was a spectacle and novelty to the audience. The reactions of the audience show the absurdity of trying to unite the two types of gender relations. Ultimately, this protest is unable to show that Muslim women who wear the niqab or the burqa are compatible with the requirements of French citizenship as espoused in French political discourse.

The reasons that the NiqaBitches veil in their protest falls within some of common reasons that Scott cites as justifications or motivations for wearing the veil, but is unable to address the range and variability of significances that it holds for women. For immigrant women, the veil serves as a source of nostalgia and a way to hold onto a fading tradition. This reason is not applicable to this viral video. The NiqaBitches made their non-immigrant status

known and perverted the traditional image of the veil by hyper-eroticizing it. Another reason that Scott cites is that women are required by others to wear the veil as a sign of modesty and a way to control sexuality. The NiqaBitches are not wearing the veil as a sign of modesty; their wearing of the veil is sexualized and not imposed upon them. They are enacting agency in choosing to wear the veil, and in so doing they are making a statement. The veil is their means to express themselves and their political position in relation to legislation banning styles of veiling. They are able to express an identity and “talk back,” which are also two reasons cited by Scott as to why women veil. They are neither wearing it as a means of sexual protection nor a means of refusing both parental discipline and social pressure. Their performance contests the most common interpretation of women who veil—that Muslim men coerce and imprison veiled women. Furthermore, their performance cannot be viewed as resistance to the corruption of secular, Western Capitalism, which is a view espoused by some Muslims (Scott 137). Some evidence for this may be found in the six mosques that Mahmood studied, all of which shared a concern for the increasing secularization of Egyptian society, an important consequence of which is the erosion of a religious sensibility they considered crucial to the preservation of “the spirit of Islam” (Mahmood 43). Other French Muslim women who wear the veil may do so as a means of demanding respect for difference—a call for integration without assimilation. And others wear the veil for purposes of anti-assimilation and to express an anti-France sentiment (Scott 137-8). The NiqaBitches are not calling for anti-assimilation. They are “de-dramatizing” the debate by trying to normalize the veil through hyper-sexualization, in order to make it more palatable to French society—creating the conditions under which Muslim women may assimilate without having to remove their coverings.

4.2 Princess Hijab

Princess Hijab is an anonymous postmodern guerilla graffiti artist, whose artwork has become a form of protest due to the cultural and political climate in France with the emergence of the burqa ban. Princess Hijab began her work of “hijabizing” or “niqab interventions” on Western media advertisements on the Paris metro in 2006. Since then it has gained great political significance. The postmodern nature of her art helps her reject what is normative. The visceral reaction that her artwork may cause a viewer pushes the viewer into a zone of discomfort. This “shattering of belief” experienced allows for the viewer to step beyond the commonsensical bounds of normative beliefs about the veil (Lyotard 9). The heavy burden of interpretation placed on the viewer gives her work great transformative power. She exposes the fallacy of the “open” gender relations through which French gender equality is achieved by exposing the female body. This is done through exposing the reality of the oppressiveness of Western capitalism and consumerism. Her work generates a discourse in which the veil may be reinvented as a symbol of protection and liberation, even in the West.

The work of Princess Hijab is another form of protest that has come into being due to the cultural tension surrounding the controversy over the latest burqa ban in France. Princess Hijab strikes at night with a thick black marker and draws niqabs on women and men in Western media representations. Her first documented hijabization was on an album poster, in which she “veiled” the popular French singer Diam, who ironically has since converted to Islam. She is most interested in targeting the ads that are the most protected, guarded by cameras. The protected status is something that draws Princess Hijab’s attention. Protection is related to value. What is protected most in any given culture is something that serves the purpose of preservation of that culture. French equality, based upon “open” gender systems and visibility of the female body, is

a foundation of the republic. And to this end, Princess Hijab focuses her work on the issue of visibility as especially related to the human figure—to threaten and invert the principles upon which the burqa ban is legitimated. Originally Princess Hijab made comments that her work was apolitical. However when the work itself is viewed, the cultural and political climate allows for it to take on different meanings. In the November 11, 2010 interview with Angelique Chrisafis in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Princess Hijab states, “if it was only for the burqa ban, my work wouldn’t have any resonance for very long. But I think the burqa ban has given a global visibility to the issue of integration in France” (Chrisafis). In this statement, Princess Hijab recognizes that her work is necessarily tied to the cultural and political climate in which one views it. The significance of her art is not stagnant and acquires different alternative meanings depending on the social, cultural, and political location of the viewer.

The art of Princess Hijab may be considered postmodern in light of the theoretical work of Hans Blumenberg in “Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong,” Jean-François Lyotard in “Answer to the Question, What is the Postmodern?,” and Roland Barthes’ in “Death of the Author.” Blumenberg argues that ‘the modern’ is inextricably linked with ‘the secular.’ The meaning and existence of ‘the secular’ is necessarily defined in relation to or rejection of ‘the religious’—its binary opposite. Secularism is a reaction against a religious past from which it is always in a process of breaking away. ‘The secular’ is thus unable to give up what precedes it, namely, ‘the religious,’ for it is a prerequisite for its existence. Thus, the goal of secularism in a theoretical sense can never be achieved. The project of modernity is a process of linear progressions towards secularism, something that is necessarily always denied due to its dependence on ‘the religious.’ The actual age of modernity is always withheld, and thus the projects of ‘the modern’ are always encoded with their failure. The project of ‘the postmodern’

must be towards an understanding of history that is not cluttered with the continual failure to achieve 'the modern.' And thus, the projects of postmodernism are to interrogate the principles of meta-theories of 'the modern' to destabilize their privileged position and open the field to interpretation. The artwork of Princess Hijab engages in this project: it destabilizes the privileged status of Western capitalism, consumerism, and sexual emancipation in French society of 'the modern.'

We may build upon Blumenberg's conception of 'the modern' and 'the postmodern' with Lyotard's analysis of the realist art of 'the modern' and the art of 'the postmodern.' The artistic expression of 'the modern' is equated with 'representation,' something that purports to represent some objective reality that had existed. It hides the fact that it represents no reality through the guise of beauty, or the "consolation of correct forms" according to a consensus of taste (Lyotard 15). The postmodern condition expresses itself in art through presentation. Presentation is always in the present tense; it is not what endures or has some stagnant historical foundation upon which to rest. It takes on the qualities of an event. Lyotard stipulates some features of postmodern art. First, it invokes the unrepresentable in the presentation itself, meaning that it does not try to hide that art does not represent reality. Second, it "refuses the consolation of correct forms [and] the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia" (Lyotard 15). Postmodern art neither conforms to what people find beautiful or 'art' in a conventional sense nor worries itself with the question. And lastly, it investigates the rules of art and art itself.

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinate judgment; by the application of given categories to this

text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what will have been made. This is why the work and the text take on the properties of an event. (Lyotard 15)

The artwork of Princess Hijab takes on the quality of an event. Princess Hijab's original performative of creation is always in the present tense. This liberates the viewer to extract a unique meaning, given her or his position within various cultural and political discourses that situate her or him within that moment of viewing—it is not art of 'representation' with a fixed historically located meaning. Postmodern art is not meant to endure, for if it was it would have a stagnant historical foundation upon which meaning is fixed (Lyotard 15). The temporality of her graffiti, lasting only about forty-five minutes before it is removed, demonstrates that the character of Princess Hijab recognizes that her artwork is not meant to endure. Her work is a performative, with the importance on the action itself, which may also be explained through the anonymity she maintains. However in the case of Princess Hijab's work, camera lenses capture the images. This allows her art to be reinvented each time it is viewed. And thus her original performative acquires different meanings in relation to different viewers at different political and cultural moments in time. Her work refuses consolation of correct form, a consensus of taste, and a feeling of nostalgia. It is provocative, often frightening, unable to fit within the normative conception of 'beauty' or 'art,' and critically investigates the principles of the advertisements that she "hijabizes." In these ways, the work of Princess Hijab fulfills the criteria of postmodern art as established by Lyotard. This gives the artwork of Princess Hijab great power to make a statement that will yield social and political transformation.

Another salient aspect of postmodern art expressed in the art of Princess Hijab is the death of the Author and the liberation of the reader. In Barthes, ' "Death of the Author," the privileged connection between an Author and the text is dismantled, whereby the art may no longer be understood as a divine expression of the artist. In Barthes' schema, writing or any form of artistic expression is a "performative." A performative is a rare verbal form in the first person present tense, in which the enunciation has no content other than the act by which it is uttered. It is an utterance or act that brings something into being. Reading is the event of interpretation. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit, a final signified. It limits the potentiality of the work. "The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us" (Barthes 143). To kill off the author is to refuse to fix a meaning to the text. The death of the Author is necessary for the birth of the reader.

The artist behind the *character* of Princess Hijab kills off the Author in her works. In her interviews, she refers to Princess Hijab in the third person. When asked questions about Princess Hijab's work, she refuses to fix a nature or set of characteristics to Princess Hijab. The anonymity of the artist and the inability to ascribe a set of characteristics or biography to the character deny the audience of her work an Author from which they can extract an allegorical meaning of the work. The process of interpretation is investigation of text, or art, which is a "tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture," that creates a multidimensional space to be interrogated by the reader (Barthes 146). This places the burden of interpretation heavily on the audience. In killing off the Author, the audience is forced to critically evaluate the veil and Western media advertisements. They cannot appeal to the social,

political or cultural location of the Author to find meaning in the work. This is a powerful aspect of the work of Princess Hijab, for it forces its audience to critically engage with the meaning of the veil, Muslim women in French society, and the burqa ban.



(Veiled Art: “princess Hijab”).

In a brief documentary on Princess Hijab by Babelgum Metropolis (an online news source for art, design, fashion, and urban culture) the mysterious artist is followed in the act of hijabizing. The music played is mysterious and ominous. The viewer sees her dress. She is wearing tights and flip flops, when she puts on her costume. She wears a dark hooded robe with bright accents of color. The hood has long black hair attached to the rim, rendering her face invisible. She hangs her head low and moves elusively throughout the metro. She finds an advertisement, looks around, breaks into the glass encasement, and then with her hands covered in grey gloves, adorned with green painted fingernails, pulls out her black marker and smears a “niqab” over the face and exposed bodies in the advertisements. The paint drips down from the

bottom of the niqab. The niqab is left incomplete, allowing the audience to see what was below it. She then closes the encasing around the ad and then moves to the next. The dripping paint heightens the feeling of presence, as if she has only just staged her attack and may be around the corner. It adds a looming hostility to the visceral reaction that can be expected of its audience. She works quickly and with an almost violent passion. The video is voiced over by an interview with the artist who talks about Princess Hijab in the third person and denies the character a stagnant set of characteristics. She has killed off the Author, placing the burden of interpretation heavily on the audience and opening up the art to an inexhaustible amount of interpretations. Removing the Author of the vandalism also has the effect of increasing the level of mystery and the antecedent fear-of-the-unknown. The art becomes more powerful and gives the messages it may yield more resonance. In the following excerpt from an interview with the character of Princess Hijab, the artist makes her role distinct from the character. The character is denied a biography that could indicate a social location from which we could derive meaning. However, the artist does point the viewer's attention to a crucial aspect of Princess Hijab's work—namely, the interrogation of the human figure.

Princess Hijab has two personalities like Ying and Yang. At daytime she is pure, shy and reserved and at night she is undergoing a transformation: she becomes radical, impartial and intransigent. The best advertising are those that highly inspire my character. But it's also those that are the most difficult to get access to. That's also the Princess Hijab's goal—to reach exactly those ones. But these images are protected by cameras. Somehow they are even more protected than the human being: the advertisements for luxury goods...In France, I'm a completely marginal artist. I don't have any means, any

recognition or money to provide for my projects. So I have to be clever and try the direct way. If you are doing something outside and your method is working, then you can get recognition much faster than with a classical career. (*Princess Hijab*)

The artwork of Princess Hijab investigates the principles of Western media advertisements and the privileged status of the exposed female figure. She uses “niqab interventions” to disrupt the liberty assumed in the “freedom” of women to expose their bodies. The normative Western notion of the veil is one of enslavement. French political discourse reinforces the leveling of the power, variety of meanings, and significances of the veil to a singular, universal symbol of oppression. This is passionately contested in her art. She inverts the rhetoric of salvation that catalyzes the condescending Western prerogative to save brown women from brown men (or the institution of Islam that they signify) (Spivak 92). Her “niqab interventions” free the women in the advertisements from the commodification of their bodies by Western patriarchal structures. Western capitalism and consumerism objectifies the human body for profit, rendering the advertisements to sell luxury products in more need of protection due to their importance to the preservation of Western capitalism. The art of Princess Hijab covers the bodies of the human figures in the advertisements, protecting them from objectification. The art allows the veil to be reinterpreted as a positive symbol of protection and liberation. This mode of protection and liberation “refuses consolation of correct forms” (Lyotard 15). It generates a threatening feeling, but this feeling jostles the viewer and forces a reading outside the realm of comfort. It is counter-normative and non-commonsensical vision of the veil, and thus radical and transformative.



(Breant).

*(Princess Hijab. 2010. Photograph).*

Unlike the work of the NiqaBitches, Princess Hijab shows the emancipatory power of the veil. The icon of the air-borne, barelegged, yet veiled woman jumping in the NiqaBitch video is presented as a symbol of freedom. The freedom is signaled by the ability to expose one's legs even as one is partially covered. In the art of Princess Hijab, the liberatory possibility of the veil comes precisely through being able to *cover* the exposed body. It frees the human figure from the enslavement of capitalist consumerism that reduces the human figure to a mere object.

In the Western "dupes and prisoners of patriarchy" mentalities, it is inconceivable for many to consider the veil's liberatory function (Narayan 418). The distracting beauty of the advertisements hides the reality that women are being objectified through capitalist consumerism. The art of the Princess Hijab perverts the beauty and pleasure derived from the advertisements. In removing the guise of beauty, the lie behind the emancipatory power of the exhibitionism and voyeurism inherent in "open" gender systems is presented. The dupes and prisoners of patriarchy models are inverted. These inversions expose the dubiousness of

Westerners underestimating the autonomy enacted in cultural practices of Other women and concurrently not applying the same scrutiny when assessing their own actions in light of patriarchal structures. The inversions highlight the absurdity of Western women feeling the urge or necessity to wear makeup in public as asymptomatic of patriarchal oppression, when they also make the judgment that the veil is symptomatic of patriarchal oppression for Muslim women. The act of hijabization is able to expose this contradiction and the oppressiveness of Western capitalism.

In addition to the political resonance of the work, the use of the veil is a means of personal empowerment for the artist behind the character of Princess Hijab. She gains recognition and a unique identity through the use of the veil: “In France, I’m a completely marginal artist. I don’t have any means, any recognition or money to provide for my projects. So I have to be clever and try the direct way. If you are doing something outside and your method is working, then you can get recognition much faster than with a classical career” (*Princess Hijab*). The use of the veil in her art has given Princess Hijab a unique artistic expression. She is expressing individuality by means of veiling, which is an unexpected consequence of veiling in the eyes of many Westerners who view the veil as a means of suppressing individuality.

In another interview, Princess Hijab grants the veil the power as a symbol it is due and also explores the contradiction in visibility it creates in French society:

The niqab is very powerful, not just religiously. It has been used in fairytales. It's part of the collective memory. A symbol of religious observance, mourning, and death. It can be luminous as well as dark. It has many symbols attached to it to the Western world and

in the Eastern world. . . . What's interesting about the niqab is that it isolates the person wearing it, while at the same time here in the Western world—especially in France, it puts you in the spotlight. That's the contradiction, by wishing to disappear from the public sphere, you're far more visible. You take possession of the public space. It's an empowering piece of clothing, but it can also be frightening. I am creating an artistic universe by giving my models a new visibility, a different point of view, which can be disturbing. My work draws all kinds of reactions. Some are amused. They find it humorous. You have to make the niqab much less scary. (*Princess Hijab's "veiling Art"*)

The work of Princess Hijab acknowledges and celebrates the fluidity and variability in the significances attributed to the veil. In the interview above, she explicates a few symbols and functions attributed to the veil, noting that they are subject to differing, particular histories. Unlike NiqaBitch whose performance intentionally reduces the veil in the burqa ban debate to a mere article of clothing, Princess Hijab's work accentuates its power and directs attention to a particular contradiction of visibility in the French public sphere. When a woman dons the veil it is often for the purpose of diverting the male gaze (although it has different significances and purposes for different individuals); however, in French society veiling makes a woman more visible. This is a contradiction that many veiled Muslim women in France face: How can I wear the veil for the purposes of modesty or cultivating virtues when the veil draws further attention to my body, whether it is hidden or not? Princess Hijab's work makes explicit how veiling does not render one invisible—especially in France where one becomes more noticeable while wearing a veil.

NiqaBitch and the artwork of Princess Hijab contribute contrasting commentaries on this contradiction of visibility. NiqaBitch hyper-sexualizes the veil, creating an image of the veil that could never be compatible with embodying piety or modesty and/or the veil as a means to draw further attention to the human figure, whereas the work of Princess Hijab interrogates the *exclusive* equation of women's agency with sexualized bodies in Western capitalist aesthetics. The sexuality invoked by the bodies in the advertisements is covered. The addition of the veil creates a powerful, yet disturbing image, which refuses the "consolation of correct forms" (Lyotard 15). She refuses to objectify the veil through sexuality, making the symbol more powerful. Furthermore, Princess Hijab says that in veiling, "you take possession of the public space." In veiling one may assert her identity as a pious Muslim woman (if this is the intent or identity of the wearer), an assertion that cannot be stripped of you by your surroundings. Princess Hijab calls for anti-assimilation and retention of the meanings that the veil holds for its wearers.

The art of Princess Hijab clearly disrupts the resistance/subordination binary. The art of Princess Hijab does not conflate and straddle the poles of the binary, as NiqaBitch does, rather it inverts it. The art of Princess Hijab presents veiling as an act of resistance and being the pawn of Western capitalism as an act of subordination. Veiling is the privileged form of conduct in the art. This reversal breaks away from the normative Western resistance/subordination binary. Princess Hijab and NiqaBitch both refuse this model, whereby disrupting the dominant model by which the lives of Other women are assessed by Western feminists.

In the second interview with Princess Hijab, she notes that people tell her to "make the niqab much less scary." The request is one of assimilation. Make the veil more palatable to French sensibilities. Remove its ability to be a radical demarcator of difference. Normalize it.

These are not requests to which the art of Princess Hijab conforms. It does not “de-dramatize the debate,” as NiqaBitch intended their performance to do (Samuel). It makes the debate serious, almost scary. This is another powerful aspect of the art. Considering that the burqa ban will directly affect relatively few Muslim women in France, it may be easy for the average Parisian to have the effects of the ban go unnoticed on the streets. The art is making a statement that conveys the severity of the debate, something that NiqaBitch fails to do through their intent of “de-dramatization.” The gravity of the decision and the implications the burqa ban has on Muslim women can be felt in the artwork of Princess Hijab.

Some may perceive this unsettling effect of Princess Hijab’s artwork as risking adverse consequences by reinforcing the French public’s paranoid perceptions of the veil. Princess Hijab’s hijabizing artwork destroys the advertisements on the Paris Metro. It corrupts their “beauty.” And the alien nature ascribed to the niqab in the context of the art has the potential to stir fears of Islam, corrupting French society and the republic. French equality is related to visibility of the female body, this is something that the veil in Princess Hijab’s art denies. The staunch juxtaposition of the “open” and “covered” gender systems in her art displays the “covered” gender system and Islam taking over the public space in France. In this sense, the protest that her art brings into being may be counterproductive in light of the preexisting fears of Islam, corrupting Western values and way of life.

Although these less favorable interpretations of the artwork of Princess Hijab may have legitimacy, the protest and the discourse that the art brings about have more positive potential. The protest of NiqaBitch and the artwork of Princess Hijab explore the burqa ban from different vantage points that the abstract arguments posed by both sides of the debate cannot reach. They highlight the complications over which opponents and proponents of bans against veiling try to

place simple theoretical frameworks. They both show the inadequacy of the debate to connect to the reality of veiled Muslim women in France. Their protests differ in form, message, and effectiveness. The work of NiqaBitch brings into being a hyper-sexualized notion of the veil aimed at assimilation into French society. The work of Princess Hijab is radically anti-assimilation and asserts the importance and power of the veil. The former tries to diminish the debate to resolve the issue, while the latter pushes the debate to the center of your attention, into a place where you cannot help but critically interrogate the burqa ban.

5. Conclusion

The justification for the burqa ban provided by the French government defers to the preservation of the republic and its foundational principles. This dominant discourse on veiling in France reduces the veil to a symbol of oppression and employs the rhetoric of salvation to keep the more controversial impulses of the ban obscure. Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and the “dupes and prisoners of patriarchy” (Narayan 419) mentalities have fueled the generation and legitimation of the burqa ban. Through analysis of the theoretical and ethnographic work of Joan Scott, Lila-Abu-Lughod, Uma Narayan, and Saba Mahmood, it is clear that the veil is not and should not be considered synonymous with oppression. Instead, these theorists illuminate the variability and fluidity of the veil as a symbol and its practical importance in the lives of veiled Muslim women. The discourses that these theorists bring into being are infused in the performative protests of NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab, and help analyze the protests’ radical import.

NiqaBitch and the artwork of Princess Hijab are propelled by a common oppositional

impulse and compel us to different understandings of the veil. However, a comparative reading of the two protests reveals their very different oppositional effects. NiqaBitch tries to “de-dramatize” the debate. They attempt to show the absurdity of prohibiting a piece of clothing. The way in which they achieve this end has a paradoxical nature. NiqaBitch creates a hyper-sexualized conception of the veil. In doing so, they disrupt the dominant model by which the lives of Other women are assessed by Western feminists—the resistance/subordination binary. This is a radical act. However in hyper-sexualizing the veil, they diminish its importance and suggest that the only way the veil may be palatable to French sensibilities is through its sexualization. They advocate assimilation; however, provide no viable means of achieving it.

The artwork of Princess Hijab has more radical and transformative power. It is postmodern and arresting. The work is vandalism. But out of the destruction comes a positive symbol of the veil, one of liberation and protection. This form of liberation or protection is not commonsensical; it is jarring and threatening. It pushes the viewer out of their comfort zone and into a space where radically new interpretations of the veil and the status of Muslim women in French society may be conceived. The heavy burden her art places on the viewer gives her work transformative thrust, because the viewers are forced to critically engage with the issue of veiled Muslim women in French society. She gestures towards a more progressive and complex discourse around the act of veiling and the issue of Muslim integration in France. Her work presents veiling as the privileged form of conduct, inverting the dominant discourses on veiling. Through the inversion, she exposes the oppressiveness of Western capitalism and exhibitionism inherent in “open” gender systems. Her art suggests that assimilation into French society as it is today would be to the detriment of veiled Muslim women.

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