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Covering Muslim Women at the Beach:
Media Representations of the Burkini

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Abstract

Around January 2007, a bathing suit designed for Muslim women became a media sensation. The multi-piece, water-repellent suits, designed especially for women who practice sartorial hijab, cover all of a woman's body except the face, hands, and feet. Although multiple companies sell these swimsuits, which retail for \$100-\$200, the one that has received the most media attention is the Australia-based brand Ahiida, which trademarked the name "Burqini." The press around the world eagerly adopted this portmanteau of "burqa" and "bikini," and generally refers to all full-body swimsuits marketed to modestly-dressing women as "burkinis."

UCLA THINKING GENDER

Covering Muslim Women at the Beach: Media Representations of the Burkini
(Presentation Version)

Shanon Fitzpatrick, UCI, History

Around January 2007, a bathing suit designed for Muslim women became a media sensation. The multi-piece, water-repellent suits, designed especially for women who practice sartorial hijab, cover all of a woman's body except the face, hands, and feet. Although multiple companies sell these swimsuits, which retail for \$100-\$200, the one that has received the most media attention is the Australia-based brand Ahiida, which trademarked the name "Burqini." The press around the world eagerly adopted this portmanteau of "burqa" and "bikini," and generally refers to all full-body swimsuits marketed to modestly-dressing women as "burkinis." (IMAGE)

The copious amount of attention that English-language news outlets have paid to these swimsuits—which, after all, look very much like common wetsuits—has been surprising. Of course, the very term 'burkini' is the stuff of headline writers' dreams, but the burkini's media popularity seems to have well outstripped the garment's novelty. This paper critically analyzes the burkini's celebrity through focusing on news stories and other media representations of the burkini that originated in the United States, England, and Australia; notably, media productions created in one of these places frequently traveled to the others in addition to resurfacing in media outlets around the world.¹

¹ I began this project by examining representations of the burkini in the American media. It soon became clear, however, that footage and stories produced in England and Australia frequently appeared in American media outlets (and vice versa), thus I expanded the focus of this paper to include English language-media representations more generally. The percentage of citizens who identify as Muslim in these nations is relatively small (1-3% of the total population), yet as many scholars of "Islamaphobia" have pointed out, Muslims loom large in contemporary cultural and political debates in these places. My preliminary research into media representations of the burkini in other European nations has confirmed that coverage of burkini-clad women proliferated throughout Europe in 2007.

My research situates the burkini's celebrity within the historic context of recent increased Muslim immigration to Christian-majority nations where ideals of multiculturalism have existed alongside realities of cultural conflict, segregation, suspicion, and racist nativism, especially in the wake of the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001. Through tracing several main themes and motifs that characterize media coverage of the burkini, this paper suggests that the burkini's media popularity is rooted in its constructed identity as a visual symbol that refracts multiple overlapping contemporary debates about immigration, feminism, "culture-clashes," and national identity. Furthermore, my analysis contributes to a body of scholarship that examines the ways in which women's fashion and female bodies persistently serve as discursive sites of meaning and arenas of contestation in the construction of national and international imaginaries.²

Theme One: Assimilation, Integration, and Crossing Cultural Divides

The most prominent and persistent theme in the burkini coverage I encountered portrays this swimsuit as an agent of assimilation and integration. In this narrative, Muslim girls and women who are living in non-Islamic countries don this revolutionary swimsuit and finally get to participate in popular sporting and leisure activities. Beaches and pools become metonymic representations of the dominant non-Muslim culture: Reuters, for instance, described Australia's beach life guarding clubs as "once a bastion of white Australian culture and still a heartland of the country's sun-bronzed, heroic self-myth."³ Buff lifeguards and women in bikinis represent

Obviously, further research that takes into account non-English media coverage with an attention to local political and cultural circumstances is certainly warranted.

² For analyses of English-language media coverage of Muslims see E. Poole. *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (London. I. B. Tauris, 2002) and Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamaphobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2008).

³ *Press-Register* (Mobile, AL), "Offbeat Religion News" Jan. 20, 2007. 1D3.

non-Muslims while covered women—usually native-born and college-aged—stand-in as visually conspicuous (yet relatively non-threatening) symbols of the Muslim community.

I specifically mention Australia because of its prominent place in burkini news coverage. Much of the burkini stock footage used throughout the English-speaking media originated in an Australian documentary about a Muslim life-savers training program that emerged in the wake of the riotous mob violence that erupted between ethnic Lebanese and white Australians at Cronulla Beach, a suburb of Sydney, in December 2005. References to these incidents, which were dubbed the Cronulla race riots, foreground most English-language news articles and reports about Ahiida's Burqini. The central character that emerged in these stories was Mecca Laalaa, a twenty-year-old observant Muslim student who became Australia's first Muslim female life-saver. This BBC-produced documentary, titled *Race for the Beach*, frames Mecca's burkini as an agent of assimilation—an Australian-made consumer product that allows Mecca to participate in the dominant beach culture while still remaining observant of her religion. The documentary emphasizes the “political pressure” invested in Mecca's success and represents Mecca's burkini as a new tool of diplomacy.

. Notably, however, Mecca does not describe herself as any type of ambassador; instead, she clearly states that she is participating in the lifesaving program in order to achieve personal goals she has set for herself: her new burkini allows her to comfortably and conscientiously contribute to public safety. Nevertheless, the documentary remains fixated on Mecca's wardrobe decisions: indeed, the male narrator who follows Mecca around while she is shopping insists that Mecca's participation in lifesaving represents a “compromise” of her religion. (VIDEO CLIP). Significantly, this emphasis on “compromise,” through which the narrator frames Mecca's

decisions to wear bright headscarves and burkinis and participate in lifesaving, contradicts what Mecca says about her choices.

This theme of the burkini as agent of assimilation and a panacea for racial and ethnic tensions pervades English-language media coverage of the swimsuit. “Muslim Swimwear Eases Australian Divide”⁴ proclaimed one typical headline. KNBC Los Angeles declared, “‘Burkini’ Covers Muslim Women at Beach: Australian Designer Wants Women to Integrate.”⁵ Sometimes the language that journalists use to describe the cultural gulf that the burkini allows Muslim women to cross is explicitly ethno-centric in tone. For instance, a *Newsweek* feature on the burkini quipped: “American Muslims, especially those in the second generation, say they live in two worlds--the traditional, religious world of their parents and *the world of the rest of us*” [emphasis added].⁶ In this mainstream news magazine, the author sets up a jarringly explicit dichotomy between Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Americas while making it very clear which side she is on. Here, the burkini operates as a symbolic testament to the continuing cultural chasm between “us” and “them:” at the same time, however, young women consumer’s burkini-clad bodies represent a bridge between the dominant culture and Muslim communities, which media-producers frame as a one-way street that brings “outsiders” into the dominant community through assimilation and integration.

Theme Two: Progress and Moving Forward

Another facet of the media’s focus on assimilation involves the portrayal of the burkini as a modernizing invention that brings Muslim women’s fashion and leisure pursuits (nearly) up to speed with those of their non-Muslim female counterparts. This construction is supported by the

⁴ Shanthy Nambiar and Shamim Adam. “Muslim Swimwear Eases Australian Divide” *Bloomberg.com* Apr. 20, 2007. Online at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a4ZESNJwOVDM>

⁵ <http://209.85.173.104/search?q=cache:ME6epvGtuXoJ:www.knbc.com/news/10754064/detail.html+burkini&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=5&gl=us>

⁶ “Belief Watch: Surf’s Up!” *Newsweek*, Jan. 29, 200. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/70174>

manufacturers of modest swimsuits themselves. The *Chicago Tribune* reported on Burqini inventor Aheda Zanetti joking that "'There's not much modern in Islam. Not much has changed in 1,500 years."⁷ Thus Ahiida's motto is "Dynamic Swimwear and Sportswear for Today's Muslim Female." (IMAGE of Ahiida website)

This idea that the burkini symbolizes "progress," and moving in the right direction (without actually arriving there) is a common feature of the garment's media coverage. For *Salon* journalist Carol Lloyd, "progress" means being able to compete, like non-Muslim women have for years, in sports and athletics. This common strain of media coverage—which surged during the 2008 Beijing Olympics—frames covered women's participation in sports and public athletics as a direct challenge to traditional restrictive notions of femininity. In fact, numerous journalists employed rhetoric of revolution and social progress when discussing the surging popularity of commercially available modest swimwear. Notably, however, not everyone agrees with Reuter's characterization of the burkini's popularity as a "lycra revolution." A *Chicago Sun-Time's* article on the proliferation of modest swimwear companies includes a quotation from an evangelical Christian swimwear designer who markets her swimsuits as "a middle ground" between skimpy bikinis and "modest swimsuit companies out there that take you back in time."

Regardless of differences in opinion about whether burkinis signify progress or the stubborn persistence of archaic dress codes, media coverage of the burkini commonly uses the garment to signify Muslim women's relationship to modernity—specifically, to a version of modernity that is defined by women's participation in sports. In many cases, these media representations characterize minimally-clad, non-Muslim athletes as inherently (and effortlessly)

⁷ Laurie Goering, "Burqa at the Beach" *Chicago Tribune* Sep. 20 2007. Online at http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:AWNB:CTRB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=11BC92ABD3ED41E0&svc_dat=InfoWeb:aggregated4&req_dat=0D0F9A1261961D4A

modern, whereas women who practice covering are somehow “behind” or “not up-to-speed” (literally and figuratively) with the dominant culture.

One narrative that these media stories persistently ignore is the fact that for many Muslim women outside of the Middle East, hijab is not a tradition that they are forced to follow, but a conscious decision that they made as young women or adults meant to be a cultural, political, and even feminist statement.⁸ The possibility that some women wear burkinis as a bold rejection of the dominant culture’s conception of what constitutes “progress” is left conspicuously unexplored by the mass-media.

Theme Three: Freedom

One *Chicago Tribune* headline read “Burkini Means Freedom to Active Muslim Women.” A Sydney *Daily Telegraph* article that mocks the burkini was titled “Sheiks of Hate Turn Freedom Against Us.”⁹ BBC News quipped “It’s neither itsy, nor bitsy, but the burkini is certainly liberating.” California-based Splashgear founder Shareen Sabet told TIME, “I know it sounds like an oxymoron,...but [modest swimwear] is really about freedom.”

The theme of freedom persistently appears in media coverage of the burkini. Freedom from what, though? My research found multiple answers to this question, including practical freedom from heavy clothing, freedom from repressive dress-codes that keep women from participating in public athletic activities, and freedom from the male gaze and exacting standards of female beauty. Sometimes, multiple interpretations surface within the same news article.

Interestingly, however, the trope of freedom and liberation rarely appears in discussions of non-

⁸ Numerous scholars have examined the trend of young Muslim women choosing to mark themselves as religiously or culturally Islamic in “Western” nations. For instance, see Emma Tarlo’s study of educated, urban Muslim women “Hijab in London: Metamorphosis, Resonance, and Effects.” *Journal of Material Culture* 12.2. (131-156): 2007

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Muslim-oriented modest swimwear companies, such as those geared toward Conservative Christians or people at risk for skin cancer.

Of course, in different contexts freedom means different things and different people are described as free. It is important to keep in mind the enormous ideological importance that the term “freedom” carries in Western political and moral rhetoric. At the historical moment of late-2006 and early 2007, discourses of “freedom” and “liberation” were especially prominent in regard to the U.S, Australia, and England’s international relations with Islamic countries, particularly Iraq. The surge in media attention paid to the burkini coincided exactly with George W. Bush’s January 10th proposal of sending 21,000 more troops to Iraq to escalate what is called, after all, Operation Iraqi Freedom. In an essay about discourses of gender and rescue that surrounded the U.S.’s invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, historian Emily S. Rosenberg shows that the rhetoric of freedom and liberation often takes on decidedly gendered meanings during times of war: “In a struggle between groups of men (or male-coded nations), women and children make cameo appearances as emblems whose symbols of oppression (the burka, for example) can rally sentimentalized, self-congratulatory support.”¹⁰ When the English-language media uses the term “freedom” in stories about Muslim women, it is useful to keep in mind the political and gendered connotations embedded in discourses of freedom, rescue, and liberation.

An alternative way that freedom operates in media representations of the burkini concerns the modest swimsuit’s ability to liberate girls and women from being subjected to unwanted sexual scrutiny. As one fashion blog’s headline declared, the burkini “Protects from Sun, the Male Gaze.”¹¹ One controversial example of this theme is illustrated by two of Berkeley Breathed’s “Opus” comics from September 2, 2007. The strips made headlines throughout the

¹⁰ Emily S. Rosenberg, “Rescuing Women and Children” *Journal of American History* 89.2 (Sept. 2002), 20.

¹¹ June 29, 2007. fashonaburu.com

U.S. when at least twenty-five “Opus” clients censored the cartoons, which featured Lola Granola’s conversion to “radical” Islam, “Hot new fad on the Planet.” In the second strip, Lola’s “piggish super-patriot” boyfriend Steve Dallas orders Lola to wear a “steamy little polka dot” bikini to the beach; instead, Lola dons a burqini.¹² (IMAGE)

Notably, explicit representations of the burkini as a means of liberation from sexual objectification tended to appear mainly in alternative media venues, e.g. cartoons and blogs, although main-stream news outlets consistently contrasted images or descriptions of bikini-clad girls and young women to covered women. But it often remained unclear what news programs’ voyeuristic close-ups of bikini-clad women in modest swimwear stories were supposed to represent: Steve Dallas would argue Freedom and Modernity, Mecca Laalaa might disagree.

Theme Four: Pity and Mockery

Finally, I will end with one last theme that pervades English-language burkini coverage: the motif of pity and even outright mockery that has colored some of the swimsuit’s publicity. These types of accounts construct the burkini as a symbol of how Muslim women have failed to integrate or assimilate into “Western” culture. In this context, the burkini is meant to look freakish, absurd, and embarrassing. Muslim women who wear the burkini thus appear ridiculously “backwards” or utterly oppressed by their religion and by Islamic men. For example, the burkini made an appearance on NBC’s popular *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*. During his news monologue, O’Brien quipped:

This week, a new swimsuit for Muslim women was introduced called the “burkini,” which is a stylish water-safe burqa meant for swimming. The manufacturer says it’s perfect for the Muslim woman who loves to swim, but hates being stoned to death.

¹² This description of Dallas appeared in Deborah Howell, “Why Were These Comics Dropped?” *Washington Post*, 9/16/2007; B06.

In O'Brien's joke, the juxtaposition of "water-safe burqa" and "stylish" represents an absurd contradiction.

Another feature on the burkini that I include in this category is a multi-page spread in *Marie Claire* magazine on the burkini that was also disseminated as a video on MarieClaire.com, Youtube, and a variety of other online sites. These pieces of fashion journalism profess that the burkini is innovative and interesting and hail the Australian Burqini designer Aheda Zanetti as "an extraordinary lady." Ultimately, however, the tone of Marie Clair's features on the burkini is flippantly mocking.

In the magazine article, a white, non-Muslim woman wears a bright blue burkini and huge sunglasses around Venice Beach and Santa Monica. The article is illustrated by a multiple photographs of the "adventure." In one picture, the burkini clad *Marie Claire* reporter models her outfit in front of a huge sign for the Venice Beach Freakshow. The accompanying caption reads, "2 p.m.: At home in the burkini at the entrance to the Freakshow." Another photograph shows the editor sitting next to a display of wrinkly plastic aliens sitting in chairs. In her burkini and huge black sunglasses, the woman reporter looks like her extraterrestrial companions. The caption says, "6 p.m.: Alien nation: Wear a burkini and worlds collide." The title "Alien nation," coupled with the fact that one of the plastic aliens is holding an American flag, seems to be implying something about the American-ness of the swimsuit. In the context of the article, it is hard not to consider the immigration-related connotation of "alien." Was *Marie Claire* commenting on the foreignness of Muslim women in America, or was the magazine just comparing women in burkinis to ugly creatures from outer space? Coupled with the Freakshow picture, this photo does not present a flattering image of the swimsuit or the women who wear it.

Ironically, many of the representations of a swimsuit designed to shield female bodies from unwanted scrutiny employ the burkini as a humorous public spectacle. These examples demonstrate how popular culture and the mainstream media have employed images of Muslim women's clothing to depict Islamic cultures and societies as strange, abnormal, extreme, or absurd.

Conclusion

Historian Joanne Hershfield has remarked, "because fashion is a strikingly visual symbol of change and of sexuality, it is a rich site through which to explore cultural understandings of social transformation."¹³ In her study of Londoners who practice hijab, anthropologist Emma Tarlo notes that the headscarf "more than any other religious symbol, is semiotically over-charged. Not only is it subject to a diversity of interpretations by different individuals and groups...who try to control its meaning, but it is also subject to a constant re-framing by contemporary political events and the excessive media coverage of these."¹⁴ Certainly, Hershfield and Tarlo's insights apply to media representations of the burkini, which this paper has put in to dialog with current gendered debates about immigration, modernity, freedom, and even beauty.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the burkini's specific function as a bathing suit contributed significantly to its media celebrity and marks it as somewhat different from the headscarf or the veil, which are the subjects of their own rich bodies of scholarship. Lurking throughout almost all of the burkini coverage I studied were images of and comments about young, "Western" women in barely-there swimsuits. I think it is not a coincidence that the

¹³ Joanne Hershfield, *Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917-1936* (Durham & London: Duke Univ. Press, 2008): 49.

¹⁴ Emma Tarlo, "Hijab in London: Metamorphosis, Resonance, and Effects" *Journal of Material Culture* 12.2 (2007): 135.

majority of burkini stories take place at the beach, rather than the pools where most Muslim women who purchased burkinis intended to use them.¹⁵ More than the street, or the pool, or other public places, the beach exudes an explicit sexual charge on account of the sheer amount of skin on display.¹⁶ There seems to be considerable tension in the English-language media over how to interpret the very *uncovered* women serving as visual foils to burkini-clad women at the beach: do they represent the far-end of a spectrum of progress and liberation toward which Muslim women in burkinis might be inching; or (as the Berkeley Breathed comic suggests) do they signify another “extreme” marked by sexual objectification, eating disorders, and conformist consumerism?¹⁷ Many of the burkini stories that I have framed as being “about” Muslim women in non-Muslim nations might easily be re-framed as stories about the relationship between women’s bodies and female sexuality and conceptions of how political and personal freedom, social progress, national identity, and global multiculturalism should look.

¹⁵ Several of the news articles and videos I encountered explicitly mention that most burkinis are purchased to be worn at public pools during gender-segregated swimming hours. Yet, most of the images in these stories are nevertheless of the beach.

¹⁶ For an examination of the beach in English-language popular culture see R.L. Rutsky “Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach” *Film Quarterly* 52.4 (1999): 12-23.

¹⁷ Many scholars have written about the bikini. For an analysis of the swimsuit’s relations to U.S. militarism, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. For an analysis of standards of female beauty see Kathryn Pauly Morgan, “Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies” *Hypatia* 6.3 (1991): 25-53.