

Chapter 22

‘Veiled for Day’: Social Justice Experiments and Race Pedagogies

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This chapter describes a social justice experiment, called “Veiled for a Day,” that aimed at challenging students’ assumptions about our so-called “post-racial” society, fostering in them the need for critical reflection and reevaluation of their own cultural norms, identities, and values through a perspectival shift that allows them to inhabit Otherness and experience the Other’s difference through the eyes of the Other herself. While contemporary theories of multicultural education frequently appeal to practices of intercultural competency grounded in the ideals of tolerance, pluralism, and inclusion that promote the value of living together with and across (essentialized) forms of difference, these theories end up promoting the (aesthetic and/or erotic) appreciation, commodification, and consumption of difference through “progressive discovery” of the Other and her secret source of enjoyment (Žižek 1997) especially, what I call the Other’s three F’s namely, food, fabrics, and festivities.

Against this consumptive and incorporative politics that at best encourages empathy for the Other from one’s own presumably superior position, this experiment sought to encourage mainstream American students to develop what the postcolonial critic, Gayatri Spivak, calls “transnational literacy,” through which students not only rethink their relationships with the Other in terms of the ethics of singularity, but also examine these ethical relationships in the context of economic inequality within the international division of labor (Spivak 1997). This shift from the culturalization of difference to its politicization reframes the problem of diversity within the imbrication of difference within individual identity (difference), intersubjective relations (privilege and inequality), and socio-cultural institutions (sites where privilege and inequality are reproduced) at both local and global levels. Invoking an iconic signifier of cultural differences, the veil or hijab, and its controversial cultural, religious, and political meanings in an increasingly

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Islamophobic public sphere, this experiment demonstrates that to be effective, race pedagogies in the twenty-first century must be able to encourage students to develop not only their moral imagination and empathy for the Other, but also their transnational literacies and forms of international subject positions that will allow them to interrogate the power differentials between Self and Other within existing geopolitical conflicts that implicate them as well.

22.1 “Veiled for a Day”: Institutional and Cultural Contexts

In this social justice experiment, which was conducted prior to and on Diversity Day (Feb 10, 2010) at a predominantly White and Christian private university in Florida (with historical ties to the Baptist tradition that were disconnected in the 1990s), participants, including 15 female students and a female faculty member of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, volunteered to don the veil, or hijab, for a day or more, and keep a journal, in which they were asked to record their thoughts and feelings about participating in this experiment as well as their impressions about the ways in which other students and community members perceived them and interacted with them on and off campus. In this predominantly White and Christian institution, an annual Diversity Day (currently called Values Day) has been proposed not only as a remedy for the problems of intolerance and discrimination, but also as a way of stretching students’ imagination and move them out of their comfort zone, by providing them with opportunities to listen to and interact with students from traditionally underrepresented groups (neatly lumped together under the label ALANA students and faculty). Despite the progress that has been made in several areas pertaining to diversity especially, the institutional openness for diverse views, lifestyles, and persuasions in the last decade, there is an obvious resistance to diversity in this institution at both the individual and institutional levels.

Working within the outdated model of integrationist politics, at the individual level diversity is translated here into a simple matter of learning about other cultures or celebrating difference in the abstract level. Hence, students generally believe in “color-blind racism,” as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls it (Bonilla-Silva 2007), and attribute prejudicial and discriminatory behavior to personal pathology (any unbecoming behavior is re-presented simply as an act of individual meanness that bears no relationship to the power structure). At the institutional level, diversity is translated into initiatives to accommodate, or tolerate, cultural differences, alleviate intergroup conflicts, and improve ethnoracial relations. In short, the policy on diversity has been framed, as the 1998 Nethersole report on diversity in this institution has plainly made, within the politics of tokenism. Despite recent conversations about reconfiguring diversity in terms of inclusive excellence that seek to embed diversity as a core educational value in every aspect of the institution, efforts at implementing diversity at this institution have been made around its periphery. In her report, Nethersole thus notes that the core of the institution, “who

controls the institution, who teaches at the institution, who is taught at Stetson, and what is taught at Stetson has not been the focus of diversity initiatives.” Until recently, therefore, ALANA students and faculty have complained about institutional non-accountability regarding individual practices of discrimination against and insensitivity towards students from historically underrepresented groups as well as the limited institutional mechanisms available for these students and faculty members to deal with such practices. In the context of the “Veiled for a Day” experiment, it is important to note that there seems to be, as the Nethesole report also indicated, “a greater acceptance of religious diversity than of diversity of sexual preference,” even though sexual orientation has more recently been elevated as the most privileged signifier or site for managing difference at this institution.

The idea for this experiment came out in an introductory course to the Women and Gender Studies minor (also renamed Gender Studies program) that I periodically teach. I usually structure this course around a variety of themes divided into five major units that reflect the evolution of the discipline of women and gender studies: the biology/social construction debate; representations of women in popular culture and fairy tales; masculinity and GLBTQ issues; racial politics; and women’s issues in an international context. In the fifth and last unit of this course, I encourage students to question their preconceived beliefs about Third World women, in general, and Muslim women, in particular, by examining the diverse meanings of the veil within the context of the increasing Islamophobia in the U.S. after 9/11 and the American invasion of Afghanistan. For the last two years, therefore, I have assigned Khaled Hosseini’s provocative and deceptively straightforward novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), in which Hosseini foregrounds the ambivalent feelings of Muslim women towards the veil and burqa that can be only understood within the context of the specific social relations that have crystallized throughout the complex history of Afghanistan. While for the two female protagonists, Mariam and Laila, the veil is viewed positively as a protection against the prying gaze of others and as a sign of the love of the significant Other, a doctor views her veil and burqa as a professional hindrance. These contradictory representations are read in relation to the invocation of the changing political climate in Afghanistan especially, the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban to power, and the American invasion of the country. Students, moreover, read Hosseini with and against other supplementary readings about the colonial subtext of Western feminist (mis)representations of Third world women (Mohanty 1984), the polysemy of the veil for Muslim women (Bulbeck 1998; Sayeed 2007), and the appropriation of women’s rights and human rights in the American wars of humanitarian intervention (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006). In this unit, we also watch two documentaries that play out these themes: Liz Mermin’s *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* (2004) and Jennifer Khawaja’s *Under One Sky: Arab Women in North America Talk about the Hijab* (2003). Both of these films problematize not only the diverse meanings of the veil for Muslim women and its controversial status in both Muslim and Western countries, but also the relations between Western and Third World women within the context of geopolitical power struggle.

As students began to grasp the complexity of the veil as a cultural signifier and question their beliefs about the oppressed veiled Muslim woman within the geopolitical arena, they were also asked to complicate the debate surrounding the veil and cross-cultural communication even further, by reading about ways for building global bridges among women through coalition politics and what Chilla Bulbeck calls, “seeing our selves through the eyes of the Other” (Bulbeck 1998, p. 211). Drawing on what the Argentinean philosopher Maria Lugones calls “world-traveling,” Bulbeck maintains that bridging differences among women around the world requires recognizing the similarities *and* the differences between women which enables women to identify common values among them as well as divergent histories and perspectives between them (Bulbeck 1998, p. 211). While she acknowledges the role of power relations between Self and Other, her cross-cultural pedagogy, however, valorizes the dimension of individual difference over the importance of geopolitical struggle for power and hegemony in the construction of women’s identities. The veil experiment, therefore, sought to examine the ways in which donning the veil in a predominantly White and Christian institution of higher learning can raise the students’ awareness of the role of power, privilege, and optional (ethnic, cultural, or religious) identity, and afford them the opportunity to experience a perspectival shift in their understanding of the Self/Other relations within an increasingly Islamophobic public discourse.

Two weeks before Diversity Day, announcements of the “Veiled for a Day” social justice experiment went out to the students, staff, and faculty and fliers were posted around the campus to inform the community of the experiment and encourage them to take a part in it. These announcements highlighted the individual aspect of the experiment, by asking students to think about how it feels to wear the veil, how others might react to the student wearing the veil, and how it would feel to view oneself “from the other side of the veil,” from within the veil. There were 20 veils of different colors and styles available for pick up, but only 16 of them were used by 15 students and one faculty member of different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Participants were expected to keep a record of their feelings, impressions, and whatever happens to and with them as they wear the veil in the days leading to the special Diversity Day session, in which they were also expected to share their experiences with the other attendees. The session was scheduled for the early afternoon on that day in a regular classroom; as the students, staff, faculty members, and journalists started to show up, it became clear right away that the venue would be too small to accommodate the scores of attendees. Another venue was soon located and the event was moved to an auditorium; over 200 people were in attendance.

In the session itself, I explained how the idea of the experiment came into being, screened a clip from Khawaja’s *Under One Sky* in which Arab and Muslim women in North America discussed their ambivalent position on the veil as they straddle two different cultures, and then asked the participants in the experiment to share their thoughts and experiences with the crowd. Their reactions were mixed: while a couple of these women received very positive comments from significant Others especially, regarding their looks (aesthetic and erotic investment), the rest had very

negative experiences ranging from complete disrespect, dirty looks, “off-color” remarks, alienation, marginalization, exclusion, to outright hostility. One of the participants, for example, noted in her journal that, “The veil-for-a-day experience really opened my eyes in multiple ways. I have never had a more enlightening moment of understanding towards other peoples and cultures. The experiment took me out of my comfort zone and placed me in the role of the Other. Rather than being taught about oppression, I experienced it (and only on a small scale compared to those who must live with this feeling on a daily basis). . . . [It] was a step in the right direction toward true understanding of diversity.”

The experiment made these students question the basis of social relations, our attitudes about strangers, and the nature of identity. One student, for example, discussed how she was “judged by familiar faces in a familiar background.” As she explained in her journal, one of her closest friends did not recognize her when she first approached her, and when the friend finally realized who that veiled person was, she simply ignored her as if she was completely invisible. Another student was turned back from a fraternity party, because they were not allowing women wearing the veil in. Other students became aware of the extent to which their ethnic identities have been socially constructed and for the white students, in particular, the extent to which these identities have been optional. As one student wrote in her journal: “I was astounded at how differently I was treated because of a piece of cloth that I had over my head. I was still “me” but so many people had difficulty looking past it” By wearing the veil, a mere “piece of cloth” as she wrote, this student suddenly realized that ethnicity is not after all optional or voluntary, a matter of individual choice, but that it can rather be an “involuntary ascription” (Waters 2007, p. 206) forced upon her in this case by an increasingly Islamophobic society. The same sentiments were echoed by a Latina student, who noted: “Being a Hispanic, I’ve had my fair share of prejudice and misconceptions about my culture Of course these prejudices and ignorant comments only came AFTER I revealed my ethnicity. The difference with the veil was that it only took one look for the prejudice and ignorant comments to come about. One look. I didn’t have to say a thing. It’s amazing what a difference a piece of material can make to some people. In my eyes I didn’t look that different but to some I looked too different.” In a society that deems American national identity and Islam as exclusive, the veil can indeed exacerbate the marginalization of those who are already underrepresented and excluded. Finally, a few students were able to place the experiment in the wider context of Islamophobia and power struggle in a post-9/11 world. As one student wrote in her journal: “By participating in the Veiled for a Day experiment I learned more about prejudice than anything else. Coming from my background, I never thought it odd to see a woman wearing the hijab, although I did feel sympathy for her knowing that she probably was the recipient of dirty looks and off-color remarks. But I never really understood how intense the misinformation about Islam is in our society until I took part in this experiment.”

These students considered this experiment an enlightening and an “eye opening experience.” It made them realize not only that as a society we still have a long way to go to achieve a true diversity, but also that it is important to continue to educate

oneself and others about prejudice and hate, and to encourage understanding, empathy for, even “feeling angry,” as one student wrote, at what happens in Muslim women’s lives on campus, in the community, and in the country. By externalizing difference in the form of a reified cultural object, this experiment forced students to rethink the ways in which they consciously or unconsciously, covertly or overtly, benefit from dominant power structures that keep intact the dominant core values that reproduce the racial, class, gender, and sexual inequalities on the campus and beyond. It is hoped that this new teaching moment would clear a space for these students to cultivate transnational literacies and alternative forms of international subjectivity through which they can develop communitarian politics of solidarity that can affect change in the world. This should be the ultimate message of any race pedagogy in the twenty-first century.

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