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Her Dark Materials: Power in the Canadian Niqab Debate

It seems absurd that in Canada where the number of niqab-wearing women represent such a tiny fraction of the population they should command such a large portion of the debate in a federal election; yet, in the 2015 federal election, one of the longest in Canadian history, they did. Perhaps the most prevalent political cartoon seen in moderate, Canadian media expressed this incredulity at the situation with an image of niqab-clad person atop an iceberg with the various political issues facing Canada sectioning off the iceberg under the waterline (see fig.1). The message seems clear: the niqab debate distracts from other issues by capitalizing on the fears of “average” Canadian citizen.

However, while the cartoon and general commentary during the election acknowledged this supposed “scare tactic,” Canada (population, media, politicians, state etc.) could not and cannot ignore the question of the niqab. Perspectives across the political spectrum urged people to move onto other issues, but the debate continues now as then to draw people in. The power of the niqab debate and, in a broader sense, the headscarf debate to garner attention derives from two factors: the formation of the national identity and control of that formation. To argue that ethno-cultural concerns around dress would figure in a debate about identity offers little surprise; Anna Korteweg and Gökçe Yurdakul recently pointed out in their book *The Headscarf Debates*, the debates around Muslim head scarves that have occurred around the world in the near past function as important articulations or narratives of national belonging. What separates the niqab debate from the usual struggles over national identity is the preponderance of the visual: especially in relation to security. Canada, unlike other countries with struggles over national identity, has always prided itself on a multicultural image; however, the niqab in the recent national eye has come to represent a redaction in Canada’s rainbow of ethnicities.

Even though this essay revolves around Canadian society’s reaction to the niqab in the most recent election, I want to place it in its larger historical context. Of course, I cannot hope to cover all the theoretical implications and instances of the niqab’s image throughout history in this essay, but I hope to shed more light on the Canadian issue by situating it in the history of the veil and Orientalism in early European history (i.e. the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period) and the contemporary period. My decision to exclude a significant portion of history between the Early Modern period and the contemporary results from the treatment given to that historical period by Edward Said his text *Orientalism* (from which this paper takes its cue). So while at the core of this paper, I follow the framework of Said’s study of Orientalism, I want to expand upon its historical examples and the critical theories applied: namely, Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the sovereign and the *homo sacer*, Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida’s work on the concept of the political, and Slavoj Zizek’s work on power and desire. The purpose of using a number of different theoretical frameworks in conjunction with disparate historical eras is to trace the image of the niqab in the discourses of Canadian culture and politics and in extension demonstrate how the formation of images in national identity increasingly inform struggles for power and vice versa in our society of spectacle.