



A HIJAB PROPER: THE VEIL THROUGH FEMINIST NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

In this narrative inquiry, I weave together two narratives of the hijab, one from an interview I conducted with a Kuwaiti Muslim woman living in the United States as an international student and the other from my memories, as a Muslim Arabic woman, half Palestinian, half Kuwaiti, an identity which allowed me to witness first-hand stories of veiling and unveiling. I begin by discussing the context of the study and the methodology and how feminism shapes the process of both my interviewing and writing. I continue by braiding the narratives of memory and conversation through creative and performative writing. The two narratives are juxtaposed because they often oppose each other, challenging the simplified notions of the hijab and rendering its story more complex. This feminist narrative inquiry presents situated knowledges as sources for understanding the stories of ourselves and others as multiple and for the possibility of a more complex feminist writing of the hijab.

Keywords: Islam, hijab, veil, narrative inquiry, feminist, collage narrative

To Speak: Feminist Narrative Inquiry and the Hijab

But in the back of my head, like when I go on vacations to the West, I don't really have to wear it proper because nobody is looking anyway. And like the proper form will attract unwanted attention, that's also something my dad used to say, that the point of it is to not attract attention, so if it's going to attract attention, you're better off not wearing it.

Through performative writing, I analyze and juxtapose two stories. One of the two is constructed from a collection of my memories and the other from an interview. The juxtaposition of these two stories is an attempt to complicate an often oversimplified representation of Muslim women's experience in wearing, or not wearing, the hijab.¹ The hijab is a gendered object, and has been used as a symbol to critique Islam's patriarchal systems by colonial discourses (Yegenoglu, 1998).

As a postcolonial feminist, I reject the use of the hijab as a signifier of Islam's inferiority to the West, its "resistance to modernity" (Scott, 2008, p. 2) and the essentialized portrayal of Muslim women as lacking agency. All of which construct the Muslim Other as lacking in an attempt to solidify the conception of the self (white male self in this case) as superior.

Furthermore, as a Muslim Arabic woman, I am made aware by my experiences and the experiences of many women in my life that the patriarchal social structure is implicated in the multiple narratives of

1. In my writing I use both "to wear a *hijab*" and "to wear *hijab*." In Arabic, there is an important difference between the two. While to wear a *hijab* may be a one-time thing (for example, temporarily wearing a *hijab* when in Mecca), to wear *hijab* is an ongoing state, it is an identity. The common English word currently used for women who wear the *hijab* is "*hijabi*." This word, however, has no connections to the Arabic equivalent *Muhajjaba* (a woman who wears *hijab*) and often has negative connotations, becoming a derogatory term.

hijabs. Although only arguably required of women, the hijab's rhetoric and discourse itself is highly patriarchal, and the voices most loudly heard in the debate are masculine.² In the stories I have seen and heard, a patriarchal hierarchy of power is evident in the processes of veiling women. This is also detectable in the stories in this performative narrative. Finally, the juxtaposition of stories stresses the diversity of women's experiences. In other words, even though I am a Muslim Arabic woman, I cannot speak for or represent all Muslim Arabic women. I do not assert to a generalized category of this woman. I do, however, aim to dismantle the masculine epistemologies of the hijab through performative writing. In this narrative inquiry I stress female voices, and female memories in order to *feminize* the knowledge produced about an already female-exclusive garment. I regard this as one step toward undoing the patriarchal epistemological processes of alienating women from knowledges produced about them in the Arab region. I use a methodology similar to the work of Richa Nagar (2006) and Ann Fessler (2007). Even though they work in regions other than the Arab world, the multiplicity of women's voices in their work inspired my choice of this methodology.³

The Gender Bias of *Hishma*

The Arabic word *hijab* refers to the headscarf some Muslim women wear to cover their hair and neck. Even though the controversy around covering women has often been exclusive to the Muslim hijab, covering

2. What I mean by masculine voices here are those of fathers, brothers, husbands, and even sons.

3. In *Playing With Fire*, Richa Nagar wrote the collective stories of nine Indian women from a variety of sociopolitical backgrounds. In the writing, voices were merged and intertwined. The writing of these autobiographical narratives included critical discussions of authority, privilege, and issues of representation. These issues were made explicit and raised with no expectation of resolution or closure.

In *The Girls Who Went Away*, Ann Fessler wrote the stories of over 100 women who were forced to surrender their children for adoption in the United States. After interviewing the women, some of whom sought her out to share their stories, she wrote them in the style of fiction, breaking down chapters through themes and sometimes combining two storylines.

a portion of the head, hair, face, or body (of women and men) is adopted by other social groups for different religious and cultural reasons. The word *hijab* itself, however, only refers to the headscarf worn by Muslim women.

Feminist historian Joan Scott (2008) problematized the use of the word *veil* (or *voile*, its French equivalent) to refer to the headscarf during the passing of the 2004 French law that banned the wearing of any clothing or symbols that display a religious affiliation. Scott's theorizing of the veil offers a diverse alternative to the prominent Western feminist critique, which continues to regard the hijab as a symbol of antiwomanism and patriarchal oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2001; Najmabadi, 2000; Scott, 2008). Following the anti-hijab law in France, Scott deconstructed the French colonial discourse that constructed the hijab of Algerian women as a form of oppression. Such a narrative masked the colonial fear and curiosity of veiled women, and unveiling (and in some cases sexual assault) of Algerian women became a symbol of colonial French domination during the 1954–1962 Algerian war of independence from French rule. Scott also problematizes the use of the word *voile* itself, since it often refers to the headscarf that covers the hair only and not the entirety of the face. She does not, however, take into consideration that the equivalent word to *hijab*, when literally translated from Arabic to English, is *veil*. During prophet Mohammed's time as an active religious leader (609–632 CE), the word *hijab* was not used to refer to the covering of the head, but was adapted later.⁴ The word *jilbab*, a loose-fit garment, is what the Quran states as the proper attire for Muslim women (Quran, 22, *Al-Ahzab*: 58-59). Here, it is important to take into consideration that the Quran requires being clothed with *hishma* (decency) by both women and men. Historically, the *hishma* of women has certainly been more enforced and debated, through a patriarchal system that often masks itself as a religious one.

Utilizing the synonyms of the word *hijab*, pro-hijab Muslims ar-

4. The usage of the word *hijab* to refer to the headscarf is traced back to the aftermath of Qasim Amin's influential book *Women's Liberation* in Egypt (1899). Political and religious parties opposing women's move from the private sphere to the public sphere accused the book of attempting to removing the veil (*hijab*) from Muslim women, and as more women took off their headscarves, the word *hijab* became a signifier for it.

gue that the covering of the hair and body of a woman *veils* her from evil (male gaze, molestation, impropriety, etc.) and also veils her from being a *fitna*.⁵ The headscarf itself is a requirement of all women *while* performing the five daily prayers. It is not, however, mentioned in the Quran as a general apparel requirement for all Muslim women outside of prayer time. It is safe to say, however, that the majority of Muslim cultures regard it as such.

As an Muslim-Arabic woman, I am made aware by my experiences and the experiences of many women in my life⁶ that the patriarchal social structure is implicated in the veil's narrative. In most interpretations of the Quran in contemporary times, *hijab* is only required of women, but a closer feminist look is overdue. Perhaps it is time to shift the veil's highly masculine rhetoric and discourse, moving the debate from the space of *hijab* to that of *hishma* to perhaps disrupt the gender bias.

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

My narrative inquiry is informed by and enmeshed in a feminist critique of positivism and, therefore, rejects a metanarrative that is constructed and reproduced. I regard metanarratives as methods employed by systems of oppression that continually commit epistemic violence against essentialized groups. In contrast, qualitative methods of research and writing offer the opportunity to advocate for *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988).

According to Patricia Leavy (2009), narrative inquiry “attempts to collaboratively access participants’ life experience and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings” (p. 27). This form of inquiry often results in arts-based writ-

5. *Fitna*: temptation or seduction. The word *fitna* is often associated with women, but not exclusively. It refers to worldly distraction that keeps humans away from the way of life God intends. Thus, a pro-hijab argument is that unveiled women are a cause of *fitna* to men, and can cause *fitna* upon themselves by seeming sexually accessible.

6. Here, I use “my experiences and the experiences of many women in my life” to stress the diversity of women’s experiences. In other words, even though I am a Muslim Arabic woman, I cannot speak for or represent all Muslim Arabic women. I do not accept a generalized category of Muslim Arabic woman.

ings, where “narratives are constructed out of the data through a reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic process” (p. 28). This essay employs creative, performative writing and implies multiple voices. Two sources of situated knowledge are interwoven and juxtaposed to combine collected data into a creative multilayered narrative. The first data source is an interview I conducted with a Kuwaiti Muslim woman who studies in the United States (referred to in this narrative inquiry as Salwa).

The second data source is written as fiction, yet it is derived from my own personal memory of conversations and encounters I have heard especially in my childhood about the hijab and the processes of veiling. The memories are written as fiction because memory is slippery and can alter or diminish with time, and are distinguished by italics. I write words as I remember them, but who is to say they have not been altered in my memory? The reason I combine the two narratives (from interview and memories) is they often oppose each other, thus challenging the simplified notions of the hijab and rendering its story more complex.

A very important part of the process of writing this paper was conducting the interview. I asked myself prior to conducting the interview: How can I make this interview feminist as opposed to an interview simply conducted by a feminist? I walked into the interview with my feminist reading in mind, as well as with my presumptions written out and ready to be shared with Salwa. We have had many conversations about the hijab. I knew that she was pressured by her father to wear it and that she stopped doing so for some time in the United States before deciding to tell her parents she wished to stop wearing it at home as well. Due to our long relationship, I did not expect to be surprised in this interview. *But I was*. Salwa had never spoken to me this directly about her convictions.

Educational philosopher and psychologist John Dewey (1980) described art as an experience, a notion still adopted and applied by the scholarship and work of many art educators. He explains, “Art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outcoming and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (p. 50). The way I regard the process of interviewing and transcribing is no different. The listening, transcribing, relistening, and retranscribing and relistening again are processes uniting “doing and undergoing, outcoming

and incoming” energies as well. In other words, the experience of interviewing and transcribing is, at least to me personally, an experience of art.

But like any other art form, the process is never fully perfected without practice, and this imperfection is perhaps part of the beauty of the experience, which Dewey (1980) describes further in his work. Listening to the recording of the interview for the first time also caused me to experience the same set of contradictory emotions known to me only by experiencing a work of art. I entered into the listening experience with the slight familiarity that one has when walking into an installation seen reproduced in print but not yet seen in person. I had conducted the interview, so I was familiar with it, but never had I fully grasped and perceived it until I experienced the listening, relistening, transcribing, and writing process. It stirred a spectrum of emotions, made me laugh and cry, and caused me to re-evaluate my approach reflexively. For example, I would ask myself: What would Salwa have said if I had not interrupted her here? What was she going to say if she did not know my standpoint on this or that? I am convinced that the interviewer is never a benign part of the interview, and, therefore, I regard interviewing itself as collaborative work.

It is my hope that the following narrative inquiry text will be read as a piece of creative writing. I wrote the following sections as a form of collage narrative, where text rejects fixity and closure.⁷ Instead, gaps of silence, indicated by time code references, offer the reader a space to intervene and weave his or, her own narrative. Even though I attempt to write using Roland Barthes (1977) concept of “writerly texts,” the plurality of this text does not signify a “death of the author” as much as a birth of the possibility of feminist collective writing of situated knowledges of the veil.

Between Us Two and Allah: Reclaiming Intimacy

“Khafi Allah,”⁸ he said.

At the dinning table when his sister said she did not believe she needed to wear hijab, that God did not say it in the Quran. That it was debatable.

“Khafi Allah,” his hazel eyes full of woe.

He had never heard such a thing uttered before.

Nor had she ever dared say it.

Her eyes were sparkling in the dim light. She looked so comfortable in her beige armchair, knees bent and legs tucked closely to her chest. Her long black hair was flowing softly and resting on her bare shoulders. Even her hair looked comfortable in its freedom and indifference. But I noticed her hands - her delicate fingers were twisting the thready ends of her wool throw and curling them round and round. Was she uncomfortable? It could not be. I have known her for years and years, and we have long talked about this before—why would she be uncomfortable now?

Does an interview have an ambiance of its own? Or is it that we are being recorded? Does she feel an external ear? An outside element to a conversation that is usually restricted to us two?

Minute [10:35], I listen. I move the cursor. (click) Minute [35:10]. I move the cursor. (click) Minute [05:20]. (click) (click) (click). Yes. She must have been nervous or disengaged in the beginning. Her voice and tone changes. As time passes she becomes more invested in her words, she becomes more ... her! The woman I know starts to appear. As though she forgot we were recording, and that we were in an interview. When did she become more engaged? What triggered her attention? (click) (click) (click) I try to find the moment. That magical moment which made her lose apprehension

7. For a theoretical perspective of collage narrative, see Garoian and Gaudelius (2008).

8. Khafi Allah: Fear God. Arabic verbs are not gender neutral, and here it is said specifically to a female. The sentence is interesting because molestation/rape scenes in Arabic films often have the woman screaming “khaf Allah,” the order in its masculine format. Thus, Arabic speakers feel a hint of irony.

and converse with me again. (click) (click).

[12:38] I started telling myself out loud that this is what I want, and I started convincing friends who didn't wear it that they should wear it. But it was never really out of conviction. It was just something I was doing for myself. To try to prove to others and then, and also by extension to me that I was comfortable and this is what I wanted to be and that I believed in it religiously.

[13:08]

She looked at me. Eyes were saturated with truth. Full of knowing. It has been lifted. The veil between us. The veil of cultural propriety that limits disclosure. She wants nothing more but to speak of this. She wants it out, to *me*. Because I knew exactly what her eyes were telling, the truth that her conviction was never solid: it was always a performance. She said she was never fully convinced. The hijab was always this strange alien thing that she was putting on to please someone. She has granted me the right of intimate knowledge.

I asked her directly: "Did you ever wear it for God?"

Salwa: No. [pause] *No*.

That was her answer. And between the two nos there was *that* silence. Between the two nos was a world of difference. What *happened* between the two nos? I know that she said the first no to answer me. But the second no. Who was it for? That very different second no was, I believe, for *herself*.

(click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*. (click) No. (click) *No*.

I kept rewinding and forwarding the audio. I was hearing the two nos side by side. I want to write them, to describe them, to bring to my writing the meaning. No, the written text can never really portray *this*

difference. It must be heard. And yet more enigmatic is Salwa's face, a thousand differences happened, a thousand stories told. Between the no, the pause, and the second no. A thousand different Salwas were in a state of becoming.⁹

Salwa: No. [pause] *No*. And I don't think God is [pause] that superficial.

If he really wanted us to not have hair, we would have been born bald. Like, I think that's just really a very reductive notion of God. So, yeah, no, I never wore it for GOD or for RELIGION or, yeah, it was for my father. [pause] To save his face basically.

Was I ready for this? Was I ready to nod my own conviction that "I don't think God is that superficial"? I was then well beyond my comfort zone. As a feminist, I did not allow myself to silence Salwa or correct her according to my belief system. But as a Muslim, I am saturated with fear of disrespecting God.

The suggestion that God is superficial if the hijab really is *fardh*¹⁰ mortified me. What if hijab really is *fardh*? Then have we just referred to God as superficial for giving us hair then requiring us to cover it? Was it *really* a reductive notion of God?

It's Just Cotton

She wanted three things from the market: To pick up photographs, to buy medicine, and to get fresh baked bread from the Iranian baker.

She was always in a hurry.

So she divided the tasks. She would go to the studio. My sister would go to the pharmacy. And I was sent on my way to the bakery.

I walked toward the baker's window. Sweat was dripping down my

9. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) theorize the state of becoming as a nomadic way of understanding identity in postmodern times, where stasis is rejected and closure is resisted.

10. *Fardh*, in Islam, is a religious requirement that one is not considered fully Muslim if not doing it. The five daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan are examples.

neck. I did not want to go. I should have told her, but she would have called me lazy again. I hated to be called lazy. I was closer, and my worries became fears. They were there. The men. Many of them.

I was not scared of men in general, but only a specific type. These men.

One was leaning down on the baker's window. The others scattered closely in chatter. It was an informal line of men, all waiting for bread.

One man started looking at me. I walked closer. Two men. More sweat down my neck. Three men. Closer. One was looking at my shirt. Sweat. Looking at my chest. Gag. Five men. I am eleven. Sweat. Six men. Trip. One man winked. Gag. Closer. Sweat.

I walked back to the car defeated.

I could not walk any closer to their filthy stares. I was shuddering with tears of repulsion and distress. I did not want to be called lazy. I told her the truth.

She left the car. She walked straight to the baker's window without hesitation. My sister held my hand. I was sobbing. From the car, we looked towards the baker's window. We stared at her waiting for her bread. Her hijab was white.

She came back in the car and slammed the door. She gave my sister the hot bread. "This is why Allah made hijab fardh." She said angrily. "It veils us from the looks of pigs. It makes us invisible to their lust."

But she did not see the men in her defiance. Only my sister and I saw their gestures as she leaned toward the baker's window.

Do we not continually commit epistemic crimes against others by assuming they think and feel what we feel? Have I not done it by forcing my personal notions of safety on Salwa when I asked her about the hijab making her feel invisible?

Me: Did it [hijab] ever make you feel invisible? Like you weren't

evident as a sexualized object for male gaze? Did it ever make you feel like it's *safe* wearing it?

Salwa: Safe? No, no. No. But that doesn't mean I felt unsafe in it. [30:00] But I, I don't feel it ever offered me any protection, if that's what you're asking. [...] No, no it never gave me safety or protection. I don't think that a garment can offer that. *It's just cotton.* So no."

It might have been just cotton, but hijab affected Salwa. It affected her psyche. She laughed when she said she could not be in a convertible car when she wore it because it "will just fly away!" and we laughed. Yet after laughing she repeated, "But it's true." She referred to it twice in the interview as something *alien* and *external*. She described how she often felt she could not breathe in it, or was having headaches. For three years after she wore it to escape her father's pressure, she would take it off in school at the start of the day, and then put it back on at the school's gate when leaving. She laughed "[...] some of my friends didn't even know that I wore the hijab! [...] I hated the thing. It's ... I ... I looked ugly in it ... I fucking hated it."

I love my hijab.

It makes me feel special.

Like God has chosen me by His grace.

I feel protected by my obedience to His will.

I feel at peace, like He is on my side.

I have gone against my parents' will, and God warns us from this. But I did it to obey his fardh. To be closer to Him.

Salwa: [...] Like in Kuwait everybody wears a hijab, and that's *feminine*, that's considered feminine, you don't stick out like a sore thumb? [Me: mmm in agreement] So, it doesn't offer that protection.

Performing the In-Between

At one point, Salwa stopped wearing the veil in the U.S. and only wore it during her vacations in Kuwait. She describes this in contradictory terms; freedom and schizophrenia, happiness and neurosis. There was a point in every trip when she would make the action: either veiling or unveiling.

Salwa: [40:45] I was getting really stressed from the traveling woes. It was, like I would think for *days* beforehand—when I would make the switch, when I would wear it, where I would wear it, and in which bathroom, on the plane, outside, before the security, after the security. It was getting out of hand. I was becoming neurotic [41:04].

Salwa was playing the limen. By switching back and forth between veiled and unveiled, she was performing two roles. In this abstract construction of Salwa's actions at that moment in time, airports and flights here are spaces of the in-between, where the negotiation between self and other and self/other takes place. She is not both women, veiled *and* unveiled. Yet at the same time, she is *not* not both women. This double negative is a state in which Salwa embodies a dualism in constant negotiation, in what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) would refer to as a process of symbolic interaction.

Tag Me, Shame Me: Oppression by Photography

[*Summer, 1994*] [Riiiiiiiiing]
Hello? Yes, Alsalam Alaikom, how are you? Yes! I am good. Glad to hear it. Ummm.. I'm calling to invite you. My mother is making me a small party on Friday.. Umm... I wore hijab in the summer break, and she wants all my friends to celebrate with me now before we begin school and everyone gets busy! Umm... Yes... There won't be dancing of course, coz, you know, it's a religious sort of party! But there will be food, and religious quizzes, and games.. We will have so much fun! What? Are you serious? Of

course you can come even if you don't wear hijab! My mother will pray for you, too, that your heart accepts it, like me! I am very happy I wore it, I feel like a woman now, you know? I even sit with the women during mealtimes in my grandmother's house. No more babies' table! I will show you a picture of my mother and me when you come on Friday. She took me to a studio for my first day wearing hijab. Yes, so you will come? Okay I am so happy! I will see you.. Bye!—I mean, Ma Alsalama!

Salwa's anxieties were extended. From an embodied possibility of someone seeing her and "reporting back" to her father that she had stopped wearing the hijab in the U.S., her anxieties expanded into that of a disembodied possibility.

Before deciding to finally strip herself of the hijab in the U.S., Salwa wore a variety of arguably equivalent hybrids that her father had sanctioned to protect her from the anti-Muslim post-9/11 backlash. She fashioned a beanie, a bandana, a baseball cap, and a hoodie according to weather and occasion. She described herself as always uncomfortable with her own skin, that even her gender performance (Butler, 1990) was disrupted:

Salwa: I used to have this like androgynous identity about me. Like fem girls would walk up to me and think I'm butch.

She describes her discomfort as psychological and steers the conversation toward self-image. After she stopped wearing the hijab in the United States, however, the spirit of her storytelling changes. She becomes more jubilant as she describes becoming more social, outgoing, and not afraid to be asked out because she "didn't know what to wear." Her anxieties, though, took their disembodied form when in social events and parties people wanted to take her photograph.

Salwa: I was having trouble with people taking photographs. And I was always at parties, and they always wanted to take photographs, and I always had to explain, "Please, don't take photographs of me." And I had to like—no body would get it, so I had

to make up stories and say, “Please, like if my photograph goes online with me without hijab, people will hunt me down.”

Have you gone mad?

Have you completely gone mad?

That’s 22 years worth of memories you are destroying!

Have they completely brainwashed you?

You really think you will give someone fitna by looking at you in a family photograph?

Don’t rip them, at least don’t rip them.

Wait... Wait!

*Just cover your hair and arms with a marker. **Cover with a marker!***

I will help you... Just don’t rip up the photographs!

Veiling/Unveiling in Solidarity

We will all wear the hijab in the first day of Ramadan.

Why don’t you join us?

We are doing it together to help each other.

It must be a difficult transition, so we will be there for each other if we get weak.

We won’t get weak, though.

We are doing it for Allah. He will help us be strong through each other.

Salwa found strength to tell her parents about her decision to stop wearing the hijab, partially from her conviction but also because a number of her friends had done it before and had started posting pictures of themselves without it on social media sites. She called them individually and asked how they had done it and what their parents’ reactions were.

Salwa: [41:45] And I felt that there is [pause] *hope*. Like I wouldn’t be cut off—well, that wasn’t really my fear. But that it wouldn’t like completely devastate my parents.

She looked at me inquiringly. She had just told me that her mother supported her decision because she herself was not convinced when she wore her hijab and did it for Salwa’s father, for very similar reasons as when Salwa had done it as a schoolgirl.

She was waiting for my reaction; she wanted to know my opinion. By that time she had completely forgotten about the interview and the recording. I indicated with my eyes the recorder between us. And she raised her eyebrows and smiled.

She continued her story.

(Re)Producing Hijab: A Dualistic Monologue¹¹

Drums roll. Man in *deshdasha*¹² takes center stage. Silence. Man comes closer to microphone and begins to speak in an assertive calm voice, often using his hands for supporting gestures.

“If you don’t wear the veil,

I’m going to be shamed.

I will be a bad father. People will look at me like I didn’t know how to raise you.

God will look at me like I didn’t know how to raise you.

You will accumulate sins.

You will attract attention.

You will *further* delve into sinful acts by allowing men to look at you.

[Pause]

Listen, I don’t see the point of you wearing this.

Why don’t you just wear a beanie like you used to in London?

This town doesn’t even have a single Arab,

They’re all White.

It’s fine to wear baseball caps.

11. This section is written by collaging sections of the interview where Salwa recalls things spoken by her father and fiction from my memory of words spoken by a liberal Arabic mother.

12. *Deshdasha* (or *Thawb*) is Kuwaiti men’s traditional costume, a long white garment.

Westerners aren't like sick in the head like Arabs.
They don't look at girls like they're meat.
The proper form will attract unwanted attention,
The point of it is to *not* attract attention.
Like Islamophobic attention.
[Pause]
Being a Muslim is more important than wearing a hijab,
Praying is more important.
If you're telling me that you don't pray because of it,
I cannot tell you, 'you must wear a hijab.'
Do what you think is right.
[Pause]
Listen, I am having second thoughts.
I didn't realize how pretty your hair is.
I didn't realize how beautiful you are.
I don't know if I'm ok with this."

Audience claps and boos. Man exists stage. Silence.
Drums roll. Woman in a skirt suit takes center stage. Silence. Woman comes closer to microphone and begins to speak in an angry, panting voice, often using her hands to cover her face in despair.

"You should change your mind.
Look at you in that thing, so ugly, so ridiculous.
Who will marry you now?
[Pause]
I cannot stand to look at you,
with this rag on your head.
They told you hijab will protect you?
Only your education will protect you!
[Pause]
It is her. I knew she was a bad seed.
I knew she would eventually make you wear it.
She influenced you. She brainwashed you.
She thinks she will go to heaven if she makes you wear it.
[Pause]

She won't go to heaven!
You don't know their hearts, these religious people.
You don't know their true intentions.
They want to recruit you, and brainwash you.
[Pause]
You are so young. Like a flower!
Who will marry you now?
Ha?
Tell me.
Who will marry you?
A bearded Imam?
You want to be one of four?
Look at you in that thing,
So ugly, so ridiculous, so prehistoric!"

Audience claps and boos. Woman exists stage. Silence.
The researcher takes stage, yet not in center because it has been occupied by other women. She is pulling her cuffs down nervously and blinking rapidly, but in her demeanor there is something solid.

After the silence,
She *speaks*.

Hijab: A Multiplicity of Narratives

In this paper, I have attempted to use a feminist informed narrative inquiry as a methodology to open up possibilities of performative feminist writing. Through multiplicity of voice and historical moment, I have constructed a collage-text. I do so in order to assert the diversity of women's stories that resists generalizations or closure. This paper is an example where situated knowledges are used as a source for understanding the stories of ourselves and others as multiple. When doing so, we evade the epistemic violence of reduction and subtraction from the voices of others.

This narrative inquiry is both feminist and artistic, and I believe both realms combined offer strong possibilities of continuously disman-

tling a still-in-power modernist way of knowing and producing knowledge. It is feminist because it honors the experience of women and does not reduce their identities through a static view of wearing the *hijab*. It is artistic because it provided the space for writing creatively these experiences to convey their complexity. Through interwound artistic and feminist methods, disenfranchised voices and ways of knowing can be given a presence.

Finally, I would like to add a more personal note. I began this narrative with “*Khafi Allah.*” A *silencing* order. A *masculine* order, masked under the will of God.

Am I scared? Yes. I am scared. But not because I am an oppressed Muslim woman afraid of man. I am scared because I do not *know* God. I cannot ask Him whether or not my research triggers his wrath. I cannot ask Him if he will punish me or if He loves me. I only have my brother’s words, “*Khafi Allah*” to trigger my indignation at a “very reductive notion of God.”

He does not know God either.

So we are equal in our ignorance.

Therefore, with all the might that He has given me, *I learn*.

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Sarah W. Abu Bakr is a dual-degree Art Education and Women's Studies Ph.D. candidate at Penn State University. Sarah is Palestinian-Kuwaiti and holds an MFA in Computational Studio Arts from Goldsmiths, University of London. As an artist, Sarah's work uses performance and installation to reflect on her identity as an Arab/Muslim woman and the Palestinian diaspora. As a scholar, Sarah identifies as a postcolonial feminist, and her academic interest include identity, displacement, performance art theory, and disrupting Third World-First World boundaries and stereotypes. Sarah is also interested in creative writing, poetry, and autobiography.

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