Fearing the burqa

Chloe Patton

MnM Commentary No 14

When confronted by anyone covering their face, you just don’t know whether they are happy, sad, angry, honest, or dishonestly dealing with you. Even large reflective or really dark sunglasses can limit your ability to read another’s face, and the state of mind when communicating with them, or dealing with them. The burqa makes me feel very uncomfortable, simply because I cannot ‘measure’ the person I am conversing with or dealing with, or even sharing space with. Since we as a society, share public space with each other, we should have the right to feel safe in that space ... if I don’t know who someone is, and I can’t see their face to discern their state of mind I become fearful of my safety. This is true of people wearing full face helmets, burqas or any other face covering disguise. Fortunately most people remove their full face helmets as the get off their bike. Unfortunately burqas are not removed in public spaces ... yet I am expected to feel comfortable with this ... well I don’t. (Dave P, SE Qld)

Why are people afraid of burqas? For many, the answer is quite simple: they pose a threat to public safety because they might be used to disguise criminal intent. What seems like a pious woman might really be an Islamist man; there could be grenades or guns or even a suitcase-sized nuclear warhead under there and you would never even know.

1 Chloe Patton is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia.

© 2012 Chloe Patton
This is not the easiest argument to sustain, however, as terrorists of late have cottoned on to the fact that backpacks and trainers are much better suited to their purposes.

More often concerns over public safety are couched in the more pedestrian terms expressed in Dave P’s online reader response to a 2010 newspaper article about the political repercussions of a reported mugging in a Sydney carpark. Unpleasant as they are, muggings are common enough occurrences in Australian cities and they seldom make national headlines; this one was deemed newsworthy because the thief was dressed in a burqa and sunglasses. For people like Dave, the burqa apparently signifies not so much an impending terrorist attack, but the more everyday threat of a mugging or burglary. It was on this basis that one Queensland MP responded to the sudden appearance of a burqa-wearing bandit on the streets of Sydney with a call for legislation banning the burqa throughout the nation.

If dissimulation of the face in pursuit of criminal ends is reason enough for legislators to go rummaging through women’s wardrobes, surely their attention would be better directed to the underwear drawer. Burqas are rarely the robber’s disguise of choice for a reason: while they may have their loot-stashing advantages, it is much easier to make a quick, unobtrusive getaway by whipping a ladies stocking off one’s head than messing about with a cumbersome burqa. Since the 2010 mugging no other criminals-disguised-as-Muslim-women cases have been brought to public attention; a sartorial edict based on hard empirical evidence would see the demise of American tan pantyhose well before the burqa.

It is not enough, however, merely to expose the irrationality of arguments in favour of banning face-covering veils on the grounds of public safety. To be content with arguing that successful projects to ban burqas – such as the French law banning the dissimulation of the face in public places – represent a failure of public reason implies
that liberal decision-making processes are otherwise rational. As Elizabeth Povinelli points out, repugnance often plays a prior constitutive role in these kinds of debates.\(^3\) Judgements made on the basis of visceral reactions of repugnance – which can range from unease to disgust and horror – are retrospectively given coherence through appeals to reason. In other words, we make our minds up in advance and then look around for a suitable justification. Once found it may turn out that the logic is sound, but that it was the driving force behind the act of judgement is a liberal illusion.

I suggest that what makes the burqa seem so repugnant to many people has less to do with security in the physical sense described above, and more to do with \textit{ontological} security. This is in large part because for many the face-to-face encounter with the burqa wearer is an incursion of the uncanny into their everyday lives. As Slavoj Zizek put it, the flat, smooth expanse of darkness with only a slit for eyes resembles and elicits the same response as a face with its skin peeled off; without the mask of the face, we are directly confronted with the ‘abyss of the Other-Thing’.\(^4\) At an unconscious level the burqa wearer brings us face to face with the uncomfortable fact of the organic and finite nature of the existence of not just the other, but ourselves. This goes a long way to explaining the many otherwise bizarre references to burqa wearers as ghosts and the burqa itself as a coffin in the French Senate inquiry\(^5\) through which the proposed legislation gained legitimacy.

If the burqa inspires fear through its signification of the uncanny in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, why is it that people do not feel compelled to discipline that fear? In

---

coming face to face with the taut, raw-looking flesh of a face that has been subjected to an acid attack we are similarly faced with the uncanny. Yet the good liberal subject in that encounter is called upon to suppress her horror. In the UK a successful prime-time television program hosted by a blonde-haired, blue-eyed former model who survived an acid attack – proof that such crimes are not the sole domain of the ethnically marked – is built around just this theme. Exploring the lives of severely physically disfigured people, *Katie: my beautiful friends* calls upon the viewer to recognise the humanity shared by all of those whose horrendous deformities – which in almost all cases involve the face – are showcased in the program. The burqa wearer obviously stands outside the show’s remit as the horror of her facelessness is not due to illness, injury or surgery. She has either made herself repugnant of her own volition or is the victim of her husband or community.

With respect to the latter image of a veiled, subjectified ‘brown’ woman in need of rescue from dark patriarchal forces, the repugnance people often feel on encountering the burqa-covered face is drawn upon in order to garner support for interventions into Muslim societies. Whether the goal is to liberate Algerian women from the haik, as French colonial administrators consistently sought to do, or to free Afghani women from the Taliban-imposed burqa, such concerns for women’s welfare are implicated in and subordinate to broader projects of imperial domination. And, as both the Algerian and Afghani cases demonstrate, the result is more often protracted, bloody, civil strife than bare-headed women. Recent debates over burqas in western societies certainly continue to deploy this rescue narrative: the suffering Muslim woman is to find solace in the embrace of western feminism, while the flexed bicep of a muscular liberalism deals with her fundamentalist husband. Adopting roles akin to native informants, brown women have been championed as narrators of this vision of Muslim women’s salvation: in the English-speaking world Ayaan Hirsi Ali has built a career by positioning herself thus, while Chahdortt Djavann’s sensationalist first-hand account
of being forced by law to wear the hijab in her native Iran featured prominently in the most recent French headscarf affair.

But what of the woman who insists that she has adopted the burqa voluntarily? Even if the burqa is understood as repugnant, is this apparent manifestation of individual agency not enough to secure her a position as a good liberal subject and inspire others to curb their feelings of horror on encountering her corporeality? Apparently it is not. Within the French Senate report the burqa wearer’s agency was dismissed as merely a form of false consciousness. According to a leading French feminist and ‘expert witness’ cited in the report,

>what we’re dealing with is a cult mentality. It’s like Scientologists or Jehovah’s Witnesses, when you ask them about their religion they’re hardly likely to tell you they’re in a cult, they say that they’re happy and have freely chosen that path.⁶

Paradoxically, elsewhere in that report the burqa wearer is understood as not just exercising agency, but as deploying it towards malevolent ends:

>there is a form of perverse pleasure in this possibility of being looked at without being seen and looking at the other without letting the other see you. It’s the pleasure of positioning yourself above the other in all-power, the fulfilment of exhibitionism and the fulfilment of voyeurism.⁷

More than simply getting some strange kicks, in ‘refusing the reciprocity of contact’, it was claimed in the report, the burqa wearer is enacting ‘symbolic violence’ against those she encounters. This was precisely the argument adopted by the president of the governing UMP

---

⁶ Assemblée Nationale, p 112.
⁷ Assemblée Nationale, p 119.
party, Jean-François Copé, in a televised encounter with a young French burqa wearer. After her responses to some well-worn arguments against the burqa frustrated his attempts to convince her that the burqa contravenes the Enlightenment-derived republican values of freedom and equality (the young woman was born in France, is not married, her family are not particularly observant Muslims and she came to wear the burqa on the basis of her own studies), one of the most powerful men in France resorted to the charge that in not showing him her face the young woman was, in violation of the principle of fraternity, victimising him.

To use Dave P’s terms, the issue is not simply one of the other’s immeasurability, but that she can ‘measure’ me, while I cannot ‘measure’ her.

Having exposed the burqa as a mechanism that enables an all-powerful panoptic gaze, the French Senate report went on to pose a rhetorical question: ‘Is it possible to found a society on such a vision of human relations? Absolutely not.’ It is a curious question, as modern liberal societies are founded on just this vision of human relations, only it is the state that is accorded the unhindered right to see. In ‘positioning herself above the other in all-power’ the burqa wearer is rising above her designated position in this scopic regime and seizing for herself the panoptic power reserved for the sovereign.

What this essentially is, then, is a slightly more sophisticated version of a familiar discourse of the non-European immigrant other taking over, of exercising too much agency. The burqa is never understood as it rightfully should be, as a religious practice that is as much of the West as it is in the West; it is only ever experienced as something ‘they’ have brought with them from ‘over there’. It becomes a form of reverse colonisation, an insurgent visual practice that is the thin end of the wedge that is Islamic visuality in which it is believed that there is no freedom, equality or fraternity, or at least not yet.

No matter how fervently those who oppose the burqa argue that it is simply a question of public safety or proper intersubjective comportment, there is always this underlying racial
logic at play. The quest to ban the burqa is not only an attempt to reassert a sense of stability upon being confronted with the uncanny in everyday encounters. It is also part of a project aimed at reproducing the ontological security afforded to those who have historically understood themselves to be the unique agents of modernity, who are convinced that the supposedly racially unmarked bearer of individual rights of liberalism resembles them and them alone.