Transnational Resistance or Cultural Exotica? Interrogating the Multicultural Accommodation of the Kufiya

Nashwa Salem
OISE/University of Toronto

The paper focuses on the multicultural incorporation of kufiya to argue that the coded aesthetics of dress is a salient non-verbal political signifier that marks transnational identities of resistance. However its resistive communication is ruptured and dehistoricized by its incorporation into the hegemonic zone of multicultural Canada. Paradoxically, multiculturalism’s disembodied production of the kufiya is further appropriated and commodified by mainstream countercultures as exotic chic through an Orientalist frame. The paper analyzes the cultural appropriation of the kufiya as a political practice whereby it concurrently operates within and naturalizes unequal power and social relationships. The processes that enable dominant groups to access, possess and (re)define cultural productions of marginal social groups are also interrogated.

Introduction

The above constellation of contradictory images reflects recent observations of multifarious social bodies linked by the elusive threads of a checkered scarf. How can a single object be iconicized as resistance, hyper politicized as terror and epitomized as fashion? These observations have incited extensive reflection upon the intersections between dress and identity as well as their configuration into a politics of representation within larger structures of western
hegemony and imperial domination. As I will argue, much lies beyond the denoted materiality of a simple scarf. Consequently, I am interested in interrogating the contradictory articulations of kufiya in Canada. In particular, I am interested in exploring how historical codings of the kufiya, rooted in anticolonial resistance, become encroached upon within the commodified realm of cosmopolitan chic fashion.

The traditional use of the kufiya in Palestine emerged as a national symbol of resistance through confrontation with brutal colonial relations, occupation and the denial of self-determination. As such, the localization of the kufiya outside Palestine demonstrates its power of marking transnational identities of resistance. The kufiya’s resistive longevity is constituted through social memory that works to recreate sentiments of anti-colonialism through the codings of the scarf; however, the transnational journey of the kufiya and its coded expressions of resistive consciousness have become transformatively ruptured through its multicultural accommodation in Canada. Hence, by traversing territorial boundaries into Canada, the kufiya has been transformed from a powerful symbol of resistance into an object of Orientalist discourse—Canada’s essentialized multicultural character fragmentatively consumes and deploys the kufiya as a mysterious fetishistic figure of the Orient: exotic, primitive, sensual and dangerous. As a reflection of the ‘dangerous stranger,’ hipster countercultures consume the kufiya as a means of self-fashioning an oppositional identity within the interstices of dominant culture.

Before illustrating the multicultural appropriation of the kufiya it is important to understand how the kufiya has been used historically as a non-verbal entry point to challenging deleterious practices of colonization and imperialism in the context of Palestine. Ted Swedenburg (1992, 1995) traces the emergence of the kufiya as a symbol of Palestinian resistance. Initially, it acted as a signifier of class appropriated by rural peasantry in opposition to elitist tarbush-garbed ‘Ottoman’ Turks. At this time the kufiya was only used as headdress reserved for the use of men. In this usage the kufiya embodied class-based distinctions intimately connected to further gender, regional and sectarian differences. The 1936 Palestinian uprising against the British marked a rearticulation of its meaning in order to represent a nationalist sentiment and reject elitist colonial sympathizers adorning the tarbush. This uprising not only marked a significant moment in historicizing Palestinian resistance but represents an important alteration in the signification of the kufiya. In its embodiment and codification of ‘Palestinianness’ it erased internal differences previously demarcated by its usage, turning it into a national symbol. It is also important to note at this point the usage changed from solely being used as a headscarf by men to also being adorned as a shoulder scarf by men and women alike. Through the appropriation as neckscarf, the kufiya is symbolically charged with political meanings.
Swedenburg (1995) notes the renewal of the *kufiya* as a national symbol at particular historical moments: after Al-Nakbah and in the 1980s during the first intifada. The deployment of the *kufiya* in resistance to the Zionist enterprise reflects a continuum of counter-hegemonic practices in which the Palestinian imaginary becomes realized and the sites of its denial are contested. Indeed, as shown in Figures 1a-e below, the deployment of the *kufiya*—in and outside of Palestine—in the past and to the present continues to represent an important signifier of alliance, collective struggle and solidarity.

*Left:* Figure 1a: Manek, R. 3 Jan 2009, *Toronto Demonstration against the Israeli Assault on Gaza*, Toronto. Canada.

*Right:* Figure 1b: Salem, N. 10 Jan 2009, Lift the Siege! *Rally to Demonstrate against the Israeli Assault on Gaza*, Toronto. Canada

Sara Ahmed (2000) explores how multiculturalism discursively imagines Others as the permanent figure of the ‘stranger’—they are assimilated as the ‘unassimilable’ (4). Such markers of ‘strangeness’ are produced through an encouraged production of local ‘plural-identity’ subjects. These productions are then materially integrated into the nation through a commodified spectacle of difference. It is in the sphere of the spectacle that global markers of identity and symbolic representations of diversity are ostensibly localized. It is also in the sphere of the spectacle where visually seducing representations of difference are sanitized of lived meaning—the spectacle is a commodity, a form of capital reflecting an image (Debord 1967). Again, the ostensibly multicultural character of Canada is given meaning through the exchange of exotic objects that localize a global human experience. Appropriation of exoticized material objects reflects the capacity to consume and perform an identity of difference. The transnational journey of embodied markers of representation becomes transformatively ruptured through their reconstitution within a nationalist narrative that relies upon a superficial display of difference. [1] In turn, objects embodied through the figure of the stranger interpellate both dominant and marginal subjectivities differently, insofar as interpellative processes are mediated through a racializing gaze. bell hooks (1988) conveys this unequal subject/object relationship as a product of ideology and domination:

As subjects people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s
reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subjects (42-43).

hooks is describing the transformative risks posed to racialized regimes of representation by virtue of its interaction with western hegemonic structures of power and knowledge. Such a framework may be extended to demonstrate how the kufiya, as an embodied socio-historical artifact of resistance, is accommodated within multiculturalism as a fragmented object of difference. Such transformative ruptures in meaning reflect a historical continuum or power relations that regulate and discipline productions of Self/Other.

Let us return to the consequences of the configuration of the kufiya in and through a nexus of power relations that convert the kufiya into a commodified object of ‘strangeness’. Ahmed suggests that multicultural nations imagine themselves through the fetishization of the stranger, “the strange body becomes a fetish which both conceals and reveals the body-at-home’s reliance on strangers to secure his being - his place - his presence - in the world” [2] (2000: 54). The white masculine body functions as a privileged trope through its invisibility and marking of the stranger. As objects associated with the figure of the stranger themselves become the stranger, their consumptive appropriation by ‘bodies-at-home” reflect an insidious naturalization of dyadic relations. This (re)mapping of historically determined unequal social relations is what Ahmed refers to as ‘encounters’ (2000: 114). These encounters easily manifest through the capitalist subtexts of multiculturalism. This is achieved through a dual process: first, multiculturalism’s attachment to producing a localized-global experience that creates a market for the massive influx of visual markers of difference. Further, racial undertones mediate an Orientalist reading of the kufiya through the figure of the ‘dangerous stranger’. In turn, the kufiya becomes an accessible embodiment of the stranger. In this sense appropriating the kufiya activates a bogus performance of Otherness satiating mainstream desires for distinction. These complex processes convert an important anticlonial symbol as a fashion appendage of exotic desire. Investigating this further, I want to explore how western mediascape and hipster countercultures—hedonistic social formations that deploy aesthetic symbols to create enclaves of opposition within the interstices of dominant culture—mediate ‘encounters’ with the kufiya. I would argue that this is a process which hegemonically positions the kufiya as an erotic representation of the dangerous stranger, a figure underpinned by Orientalist fantasies of the Arab Other.

The recoding of the kufiya through multicultural encounters positions it as an artifact of Orientalist desire for the dangerous stranger. Orientalist cultural productions of the kufiya construct it as a hyperpolitical marker of racial difference. [3] This process makes it possible for unmarked (dominant white) subjectivities to appropriate the kufiya with embedded hyperpolitical connotative meanings while retaining some distance from the ideological construct of the Arab
Other. So while multiculturalism-as-spectacle works to detach historical meanings from symbols of difference such as the kufiya, it inevitably becomes redefined through new relations of determination. Returning to the previous discussion, the kufiya—as an embodiment of the figure of the stranger, is reconstituted through a determined relationship to the white capitalist masculine figure of the body-at-home (Ahmed 2000). We must therefore consider how our bodies are located and understood in relation to wider material and discursive contexts and how this configures into different modes of accessing, consuming and transforming the kufiya as a meaningful visual marker. Sivagami Subbaraman (1999) argues that clothing is a site of production and performance of highly contested racial, political, sexual and class-based identities. Moreover, these contested identities and their relation to fashion are embedded within capitalist and colonial/neocolonial relations and as such clothing is not merely “fashion” but “a politicized practice of everyday life” (575). The repoliticization of the kufiya as fashion and subsequent mass consumption reveal that the kufiya is not merely a piece of fashion that is disconnected from power-relations, but is part of a highly politicized ongoing articulation of identity formation.

**Left:** Figure 2: Al-Nakba Commemoration 2003, CBC News Online, Canada, viewed 5 August 2007 at http://www.cbc.ca/news/photogalleries/arafat/index.html

**Right:** Figure 3: Dancing on the wreckage, CBC News Online, Canada, viewed 5 September 2007 at http://www.cbc.ca/photogallery/news/175/3/

Figures 2 and 3 (above) depict the visual hyper politicization of the kufiya by the ‘west’. Such images are often accompanied by discourses attesting to the dangerousness of the ‘Orient’ as the object of the ongoing ‘war on terror.’ This reveals a complex relationship of domination insofar as the so-called Orient continues to be constructed by Orientalists who deal with it by, “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said 1978: 3). Since the ‘west’ has authority over the ‘Orient’ including its cultural productions, the kufiya can be (re)defined by the Orientalist imagination. [4] At some points, the kufiya represents the fetishization of the exotic Orient; at other points, the kufiya is implicated with terrorism, and so on. Indeed, Orientalism has been an historical process, intellectuals, artists, writers, fashion experts, etc,
have all taken part in the naturalization of the ‘Orient’ and the appropriation of the *kufiya* is part of this larger process. Mass media productions, part and parcel to the western ideological war on terror, continuously renew demonizing depictions of the Arab and Muslim Other (increasingly conflated to strategically be representative and applicable to particular racialized bodies and territories at specific historical, political and geographical moments). [5]

In this vein, the appropriation of the *kufiya* is part of a larger Orientalist ethos, which privileges itself to know the Other. However, this is not simply a calculated nefarious western plot to strangle or hold down the ‘Orient.’ Instead, “It *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world” (Said 1978:12). The *kufiya*, as it represents part of this ‘different world’ or exotic Otherness, is brought into the Orientalist spheres of ‘control, manipulation, and incorporation’. Examining Orientalist discourse illustrates the desire and capacity to commodify the *kufiya* within the domain of fashion. Consequently, this signals the interaction of larger power relations with regards to encoding the *kufiya* as an object of the dangerous stranger. [6]

I have suggested that multiculturalism [7] operates to create the conditions for western countercultures to access the *kufiya* as marker of a phantasmal Other. I wish to now take this discussion forward and examine the expressive and performative implications of the countercultural appropriation of the *kufiya*.

**Appropriation of the Kufiya by Countercultural Hipsters**

*The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached— disembedded—from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear ‘free-floating’. We are confronted by a range of different identities, each appealing to us, or rather to different parts of ourselves, from which it seems possible to choose. It is the spread of consumerism, whether as reality or dream, which has contributed to this ‘cultural supermarket’ effect (Hall 1992: 303, emphasis in original).*

Roland Barthes (2006) explores how fashion operates to imitate what is thought to be inimitable (91). One of the effects of the cultural supermarket effect is the ease with which embodied objects become appropriated within the domain of fashion to demarcate meanings disassociated with its original form. Insofar as the *kufiya* becomes commodified as fashion, it reveals covert and subtle forms of the consolidation of hegemony; consequently, important markers of identity become sanitized for the subservient and decontextualized usage of dominant fashion countercultures. Barthes articulates this argument through his critique of hippy countercultures’ fantasies of constructing subversive social identities through clothing, “so as to
transgress the *limits* of what is conventional to make this into a clear sign of transgression” (2006: 111, emphasis in original). This is achieved through cultural appropriation of ethnic clothing that already embodies the figure of the Other. Appropriated to challenge everyday values that underpin life in the west, Barthes (2006) argues that this causes a fundamental rupture and transformation in symbolic significance (113). These diametric identities are contradictory insofar as they rely on the very systems of power they themselves exercise in performing the symbolic challenge of ‘difference.’ In other words, white middle-class countercultures are able to oscillate between their privileged social locations, or alternatively insidiously perform Otherness through redefinition, reappropriation, subversion, and alteration of strategic symbols. I wish to suggest that such processes are linked to the political project of multiculturalism.

How do countercultural hipster formations configure into the multicultural nation-building project? The nation encourages the proliferation of multi-cultures, which imagine and practice their social identities through white commodity culture. Hence, the hipster countercultures are involved in a dialectical relationship with the multicultural nation-building project, which solidifies hegemonic social identities and larger systems of imperialism. Moreover Canada’s alignment with the ‘west’ and its relationship to the Middle East point to the underlying historical conditions where the *kufiya* becomes embodied with the figure of the ‘dangerous stranger.’

**The Allure of the Kufiya**

The popularization of the *kufiya* cannot be removed from wider geopolitical events. The first and second intifada, protests against the Gulf War, invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon after 9/11 have definitively marked an increased appearance of the political usage of the *kufiya* as resistance. Some suggest that its popularization as fashion loosely follow a similar pattern (Cocks 1998; Swedenburg 1992). However, there is a significant difference between its transnational usage as reflecting collective forms of solidarity and resistance on the one hand, and fashion-based hedonistic appropriation catering to diffuse counter-cultural milieu on the other (Hall and Jefferson 1976). The latter functions upon western-situated constructions of the *kufiya*: cultural exotica, fragmented symbol of Otherness, ‘dangerous’ difference. It becomes trendy and appealing to countercultures motivated by desires of distinction. Popular representations of the *kufiya* as indigenous to the Orient intimately configure it into a consumable object of desire. The centre/margin articulation of the *kufiya* underpins the countercultural allure insofar as it becomes a means of performing difference while distancing oneself from the Orientalist connotations attached to the object (backward, violent, dangerous, etc.) (Tarlo 1996: 325).

Chic fashion boutiques have taken notice of the marketability and mass consumption of exoticized-danger fashion; indeed, catered
towards the purchasing power of dominant white upper middle class hipster. As a result, Toronto has seen an explosion of varying forms of the kufiya.

The Politics of Naming and Colour-Coding

A fundamental way the transnational political symbol of the kufiya becomes sanitized is through discursive constructions of the scarf through the language of fashion. The self-defined ‘urban-chic’ outlet, Urban Outfitters recently marketed the kufiya on their online catalogue as an ‘Anti-War Woven Scarf’ (see Figures 4 and 5 below).

As revealed in the historical emergence of the kufiya as a political symbol, its symbolic value has emerged through a context of armed resistance, reflecting an ongoing struggle and resistance in pursuit of social justice. The mythologized construction of the kufiya under the rubric of ‘anti-war’ trivializes its historical politicization, co-opting it into trendy ‘left-leaning,’ ‘peace adoring,’ ‘war resisting’ and ‘intellectually enlightened’ subcultural circles. My intention is not to suggest that the kufiya is the antithesis to ‘anti-war’ or that it does not stand for peace. Rather, the term ‘anti-war’ glosses over the hegemonic state structures that perpetuate oppression. Further, the rebranding illustrates a naivety to the various strategies of resistance initiated in the very pursuit of ‘peace.’

Urban Outfitters’ renaming of the kufiya activates new meaning, subverting historical linkages to anticolonial struggle. Further, it simultaneously fetishizes the figure of the stranger already coded by virtue of its lineage to the Orient. Moreover, implying that the symbol represents ‘anti-war’ poses a first world/third world dualism. This dualism extends to the necessary benevolence of the first world (as developed, rational, democratic) to ‘help’ or be ‘sympathetic’ to the
struggles of the third world and is reinforced by the poetic description of the desired Urban Outfitter consumer listed on their website:

Our goal at Urban Outfitters is to be the brand of choice for well-educated, urban-minded young adults. We accomplish our objective by creating a differential shopping experience, which creates an emotional bond with the 18 to 30 year old target customer we serve (Urban Outfitters 2007).

How do dominant configurations of race, class, and place shape Urban Outfitters’ idealized consumer? What is the nature of this emotional bond forged between Urban Outfitters Incorporated, young intellectual urbanites and the ‘Anti-War Woven Scarf’? Further, how does this bond encode subjectivities that appropriate the ‘anti-war’ scarf? Perhaps this relationship interpellates an informed interrogator of global disorder. Rather, I would configure the relationship between Urban Outfitters, the consumer, and the ‘anti-war’ scarf into a larger oppressive social framework. Accordingly, I suggest that the scarf forges a fantasized spiritual connection between first-world body and their stranger counterpart. The whimsical desire to oppose mainstream is achieved by embodying (at the most superficial level) today’s ‘third world.’ Perhaps this narcissistic oppositional affirmation is a means of reconciling first world guilt and rejection of the traditional role as oppressor (Root 1997: 227). [8] I do not think that this is necessarily a conscious choice made by the consumer; however, the underlying desire to possess the scarf cannot be removed from its political meanings. This is premised upon the notion that mainstream understandings of the kufiya—familiarity with its checkered pattern, its stylistic draping around the neck, etc.—is situated within western structures of knowledge production.

Vocal opposition eventually led Urban Outfitters to remove the name ‘Anti-War Woven Scarf.’ Ironically the opposition leading to its removal was not rooted in the sinister trivialization of the brutal colonial relations in which the kufiya emerges as a symbol of resistance. Rather, those in opposition maintained that the kufiya symbolizes ‘terror’, and therefore contradicts the proposed label of ‘anti-war.’ [9] Urban Outfitters authorities eventually claimed to have removed the item all together and issued a public apology. Nevertheless, walking into the Urban Outfitters in downtown Toronto reveals that the product continues to be sold in Canada. Moreover, “Canada’s Fashion Magazine” Flare cited Urban Outfitters version of the kufiya as a Fall 2007 ‘must have’ (Figure 6).
Name removed, the *kufiya* is (re)defined once again as a nameless object of cultural exotica. Urban Outfitters also stopped selling the scarves in the contentious black/white and red/white varieties. Presumably this distances them even further from ‘unpopular’ political debates. Instead they carry the ‘scarf’ in an array of turquoise, mustard, green and purple colour-combinations. Constitutive codings of colour alter connotative meanings of the scarf. Since black and red scarves are imbued with particular racial and political meanings, producing the same pattern and style in different ways produces a new language of the scarf—a different, and perhaps less threatening embodiment of the stranger. In this way hipsters donning the *kufiya* retain the dangerous rebel identity maintained in the style of the scarf. Its difference and countercultural potential is maintained by deriving ‘inspiration’ from the Other. It then is claimed by mainstream countercultures through the very alterations in colour, design and so forth. This has the effect of situating cultural productions of Otherness within complex power relations used to consume, manage, control and regulate difference (Huggan 2001).

Countless variations of the *kufiya* become particularly visible on university campuses and hipster enclaves of Toronto (see Figures 7a-e below): from the Annex to Kensington Market, West Queen West (or Queen West-West) and the emerging hipster hangout, Bloorcourt Village. These spaces are increasingly colonized by condo renovations and loft conversions; storefront shops abound with handfuls of organic eateries, bike repair shops, art supply shops, fabric stores, vintage clothing outlets and a slew of independent coffee shops and bookstores. Though spatially disconnected, a seemingly uniformed mass encroaches upon the space: skinny jeans, Chuck Taylors, retro plastic rimmed glasses, weathered tall leather boots, and of course the *kufiya*. 
Left: Figure 7a: Salem, N. 2008, Kufiya Display in Queen West-West (storefront display), Toronto Canada.

Right: Figure 7b: Salem, N. 2008, Kufiya Display in the Annex (outdoor display), Toronto Canada.

Figure 7c: Salem, N. 2008, Kufiya Display at Yonge-Dundas, Downtown Toronto (storefront display), Toronto Canada.

Figure 7d: Salem, N. 2008, Kufiya Display in Kensington Market (outdoor display), Toronto Canada.
Popular Commentaries on the kufiya: From “What’s it Called Again?” to “Terrorist Chic”

Mass media narrations of the kufiya as trendy add yet another nuance to the processes of cultural appropriation. Moreover, mass media present another avenue for interpellating possible meanings of the scarf and identities of those who appropriate it. My interest in exploring popular commentaries between Canada and the U.S.—regarding the popularization of the kufiya—reflects the power of dominant media apparatus to monopolize the cultural production of the kufiya. Mainstream media portals have related the popularization of the kufiya to broader projects of the ‘Muslimization of fashion’ (Burshtein 2007), ‘Fear Fashion’ or ‘Terrorist Chic’ (Hernandez 2006). In the same articles, the authors argue that there is “considerably less political meaning to the keffiyeh trend than each side of the political debate is giving it” (Burshtein 2007). Meanwhile, information used to situate the usage of the kufiya in Palestine display overtly Orientalist rhetoric:

worn by Palestinians defying Israeli soldiers in the occupied territories...the current televised spectacle of kaffiyeh-wearing rebels playing hob with the Israeli army gives the scarves an off, often ironic resonance when they are worn in the West (Cocks 1988, emphasis added).

Daniel Hernandez (2006) writing for the LA Times reproduces popularized meanings of the kufiya as product of Islamic fundamentalism and militancy. In his article he refers to Rashid, identifying him as neither Arab nor Muslim but chooses to wear the kufiya “to look like a warrior” (2006). Exploring the emergence of ‘fear fashion,’ Hernandez refers to the popularization of the kufiya and veiling practices influenced by Islamic veil. Here we see that the kufiya and veil are homogenized as fear fashions from the Orient that
can offer to the western subject a hint of ‘eroticism’ and ‘sexiness’ (Hernandez 2006). Hernandez’s closing remarks speak to his personal experience with the kufiya:

I took it [a kufiya] home and wrapped it around my neck and, standing before my mirror, my own countenance startled me stiff. I looked pretty damn Arab all of a sudden. No wonder my older siblings in San Ysidro, half-jokingly—I hope—call me “terrorista” when I approach (2006).

Similarly, Kibum Kim (2007) writing on the reemergence of the kufiya fashion trend quotes Mik Moore, chairman of the board of directors for the Jewish Student Press Service, in speaking to the ambivalence of the symbol and its popularization:

Because there are people who wear the kaffiyeh as a sign of solidarity with Palestinians, some people view it as an endorsement of terrorism (Moore quoted in Kim 2007, emphasis added).

In this context the reader is guided to link Palestinian liberation struggles as illegitimate through a singular link to terrorism. Moreover Palestinians are essentialized as ‘terrorists’, and therefore all allies of the Palestinian struggle inevitably become terrorist sympathizers.

Recently, famed chef and daytime show host Rachel Ray was lambasted when Dunkin’ Donuts began to air a commercial with Ray wearing a scarf closely resembling a kufiya. The Toronto Star—like many other western media sources—covered the story with under the alluring title: “Rachel Ray ad pulled over ‘jihad scarf’” (Loriggio 2008) (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: Loriggio, P. 2008, ‘Rachel Ray ad pulled over jihad scarf’, The Star.com, Canada, viewed 6 June 2008 at http://www.thestar.com/News/World/article/433937

The article goes on to cite critics who liken the scarf to representations of ‘Muslim extremism’ and symbolic of ‘murderous Palestinian jihad.’ Such racist statements were not only allowed and
granted a public outlet to echo among the masses; the statements were also successful in pressuring the company to pull the ad. The article then parallels this event to the cultural insensitivity and fashion faux pas of another celebrity that offended Peruvians when she toured Machu Picchu wearing a bag inscribed with Mao Zedong’s slogans (Loriggio 2008). The *kufiya* and its embodiment of the dangerous (masculine) figure is never challenged. Instead the focus remains on how closely the scarf resembles the *kufiya* (and if it does, it would then also become an ‘insensitive faux-pas’—though presumably endorsing a suggested ‘murderous jihad’ would be much more than a mere faux pas). The article ends in an attempt to raise the possibility of the *kufiya* as an innocuous cultural artifact: “Kaffiyehs are worn every day on the street by Palestinians and other people in the Middle East—by people going to work, going to school, taking care of their families, and just trying to keep warm” (Bishara in Loriggio 2008). We see a new narrative that seeks to reduce the *kufiya* to an ambivalent artifact of the Orient. Further, this negates the political genealogy of the *kufiya* as it emerges in Palestinian history, and does not attempt to unpack the all too familiar clash of civilizations argument proposed through the ‘murderous jihad’ comment.

**Conclusion**

This paper sought to explicate a relationship between clothing and identity production through a case study of the multicultural incorporation of the *kufiya*. My intention is to explore how the *kufiya* scarf—a historically charged symbol of anticolonial resistance becomes reconstituted through ‘encounters’ with western hegemonic tropes of power and knowledge. The cultural politics of multiculturalism have led to an increased visibility of the *kufiya* as it creates the necessary social and material conditions for a fetishized figure of the ‘dangerous stranger’ to emerge. This figure—a consumable figment of the Orientalist imaginary—has become highly desired by hipster countercultures that rely on aesthetic modes of self-fashioning to assert a false identity of difference.

There are several questions that have emerged out of this work. For instance, how do capitalist modes of production (for instance the mass manufacturing of the *kufiya* in China) configure into further discussions about power, domination and the Orient? What are the implications on the connotative meanings of the *kufiya* once it no longer is considered ‘trendy.’ In other words, what is the permanency in semiotic transformation of the *kufiya* through its dislocated western consumption? Further, can an Arab or Muslim man ever simply wear the *kufiya* as an ambiguous symbol of difference? More specifically, how do imperialist culturalist frameworks influence social decodings of individual *kufiya*-wearers?

This paper highlights the creative and subversive potential of clothing practices as a mode of representation. The seemingly innocent task of deciding ‘what to wear’ inevitably intersects with plural dimensions of
power. These complicated interactions inform desires to possess the kufiya as a non-verbal mode of performance. Indeed the kufiya can never be ‘just a scarf.’

Nashwa Salem is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at OISE/University of Toronto.

Notes

[1] By interrogating the cultural appropriation of the kufiya I am not suggesting that the kufiya as a powerful symbol of resistance becomes wholly subverted. Rather I wish to explore how historically infused meanings of resistance are ruptured through its incorporation into hegemonic spheres of capitalist-consumerism and multiculturalism. Such processes reduce its anti-colonial communicative capacity to a possibility contingent upon other overt markers of contestation (i.e. a protest). More importantly such processes reveal that Canada is not a neutral and value free geographical space upon which racialized regimes of representations are incorporated. Indeed such processes of incorporation integrate modes of representation into existing ideological systems.

[2] Ahmed’s notion of the ‘strange body’ enables the constitution of the ‘familiar body’—a white masculine body, a historically determined figure against which difference is asserted (2000: 50-1).

[3] The potential role clothing plays in creating racial categorizations is borrowed from Bakirathi (2003) who explores South Asian diasporic representational practices in the U. S.. Mani demonstrates how markings of difference through ethnic dress are intended to be received by the white gaze (configuring into dominant racial imaginaries of difference). Thus she argues such clothing practices become complicit “in the popular desire to consume ‘ethnic chic’” (Bakirathi 2003: 120). Performativity, however, offers potentials of dialectical representation in contrasting the dominant majority and ethnic chic subcultures (Bakirathi 2003:130).

[4] Here I am signaling to the cultural conditions where contemporary representations of the kufiya are produced and circulated.

[5] See for instance Arat-Koç 2005; Bullock and Jafri 2000; Fekete 2006; Jiwani, 2005a and 2005b; Morris 2004; Razack 2004 and 2005; and Said 1993 for examples of cultural relativist media portrayals of the monolithically constructed figure of the dangerous Muslim/Arab. Some of these texts explore ideological productions in the so-called
Orient itself, Muslim and Arabs in Canada or in the larger constituted ‘west.’

[6] I return again to Sara Ahmed’s work in Strange Encounter (2000), and her emphasis on the importance of how objects, such as the kufiya are consumed through imaginative constructions of the distant ‘there’ (Ahmed, 2000: 189). Putting this into conversation with Said’s work and contemporary western media narrations on the kufiya suggest that the kufiya is an historically charged artifact haunted by the figure of the dangerous stranger.

[7] My understanding of multiculturalism is that official multiculturalism and practices or popular understandings of multiculturalism are mutually constitutive (Walcott 2003: 136).

[8] Deborah Root (1997) critically examines white countercultural appropriation of Aboriginal identity in British Columbia. She suggests in her analysis that ‘hippies’ appropriate and adorn themselves with traditional Aboriginal jewelry and fringe as a means of resolving white guilt and evasion the traditional colonizer role (227).


Bibliography


© borderlands ejournal 2008