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### Covering the Face

*The Complexities of Gendered Racialization in Europe*

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## Covering the Face: The Complexities of Gendered Racialization in Europe

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The Dutch ban on face-veiling is a strong instantiation of the gendered racialization of Muslims in Europe. Racialization as a relation of power, with some in the position to categorize and impose an identity on others, produces and naturalizes difference. To justify the ban, politicians signified face-veiling as gendered oppression, as a security threat and as an obstacle to integration, bringing together ethical positions with affective and aesthetic sensibilities. The largely unheard narratives of face-veiling women, in contrast, highlighted the positive religious value of face-veiling and point to the state's infringement on their freedom of religion, expression, and movement. As face-veiling women are simultaneously defined as victims to be saved and as threat to be removed from the public, their racialization is ambivalent. It is also multilayered, with debates on face-veiling not only producing a divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, but with some Muslims also involved in the racialization of other Muslims.

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A few days before the partial ban of face-coverings was to be implemented in the Netherlands, I was invited to participate in a television programme together with Kawthar Darmoni, director-to-be of the Atria Institute on gender equality and women's history.<sup>1</sup> When she stated that face-veils are oppressive for women because only women wear them, I responded with that this is also the case with high heels, but no one would consider banning those. Amidst a wave of hostile Twitter comments, those of Ruud

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1. <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2295385-boerkaverbod-is-oplossing-voor-probleem-dat-er-niet-is>

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Koopmans, professor of sociology at the Humboldt University in Berlin, stood out. He apologized for “so much obscurantist, anti-feminist stupidity,” considered it “naïve” to believe face-veiling women who say they do so voluntarily, and added that “the terrible mistake of constructivism is that everything is only a point of view.”<sup>2</sup> My efforts to broaden the debate on face-veiling by including a brief reference to mainstream sartorial practices were clearly not appreciated.

Two months later a public debate was organized in Amsterdam to evaluate the ban.<sup>3</sup> In her opening statement Karima Rahmani, the founder of the Facebook group “Hands Off My Niqab,” argued that the ban limits her freedom to participate in society as a woman who had opted for wearing a face-veil (*niqab*). Keklik Yücel, former member of parliament for the social-democrat party and strongly in favor of the ban, conceded to Karima that she may be wearing a face-veil by choice, yet continued to defend the ban. In her view, wearing a face-veil in the Netherlands is immoral, because, whatever the intention of individuals, it is a symbol of fundamentalist Islam and oppression, as some women in the Middle East are forced to cover their face. In other words, the possibility of multiple significations of wearing a face-veil was discarded.

These two vignettes indicate how not only the face-veil itself, but also opposing the ban evokes a range of highly affective negative responses. Whereas the on-stage presence of Karima, an eloquent face-veiling woman, made it hard to label her as “oppressed,” the bottom line was that whatever face-veiling women say or do, does not make a difference. The possibility that symbols may be polysemic was not entertained, and a comparison with high heels—self-evidently considered as a free choice—was considered absurd.

This contribution analyzes debates on face-veiling in the Netherlands to better understand the renewed emergence and tenacity of what has been referred to as “the Muslim question” in Europe. Whereas the manifestations of such debates are different in the various countries of continental Europe (Brems 2014), the idea of Europe has nonetheless an enduring presence (Brah 1993, 10; Anidjar 2013). Rather than considering face-veiling as an exceptional case, addressing it as exemplary works well

2. [https://twitter.com/Ruud\\_Koop\\_mans/status/1155389524643602432](https://twitter.com/Ruud_Koop_mans/status/1155389524643602432). The author is responsible for all translations from Dutch to English in the article. All internet links were last accessed on 26 October 2021.

3. This debate, in which I also participated, took place at the debating center Argan on 3 November 2019.

to analyze how the gendered racialization of Muslim women in Europe works. As these two vignettes already show, these debates need to be analyzed with reference to the genealogies of the relationship of Europe with its external others, the emergence of the secular nation-state as neutral and the secular body as free and unmarked, and with a focus on how some are endowed with the authority to define, while others are turned into the objects of such defining power.<sup>4</sup>

### **Gendered racialization: Religion, race, and culture**

To understand processes of racialization it is helpful to briefly turn to Edward Said's work on Orientalism. Said analyzed Orientalism as a specific form of othering, as a process of categorizing and classification, that produces and naturalizes a hierarchical, essentialized difference and divide between the West and the Orient. He conceived of this process of "Orientalizing the Orient" as both grounded in unequal power relations and as a means of exerting power, a technology to dominate or exclude (Said 1978, 3). Inspired by Said's work, an extensive literature has emerged on gendered Orientalism, with "Oriental women" relationally presented as the inverse image of the ideals of Western womanhood. The gender oppression of Muslim women has been a persistent trope, which also functioned as legitimation of the colonial presence (Abu-Lughod 2013; Ahmed 1992; Al-Saji 2010; Yeğenoğlu 1998).

Whereas the work of Said refers to colonial and post-colonial relations between "the Orient" and "the Occident," his approach also works well to understand processes of othering within Europe. There racialization also draws in various context-dependent ways on the grammars of religion, race, and culture to sort, categorize, dominate, and exclude. A strong example of the race-religion nexus is when in the aftermath of the Reconquista Muslims and Jews who had forcibly converted to Christianity were nonetheless expelled from Spain, because they were considered as both culturally alien and a security threat (Shohat 1992; Soyer 2013, 413). With the rise of the science of philology in the nineteenth century, an alternative classification scheme partly replaced older divisions, that is a value-laden distinction between Semitic and Indo-European languages was produced, which also came to define differences between the

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4. This article builds on and includes some of my earlier work on face-veiling, in particular Moors (2009) which centres more extensively on the problematization of face-veiling and Moors (2012) which deals more in detail with the perspectives of face-veiling women themselves.

people speaking these language (Anidjar 2008; Masuzawa 2005, 149; Said 1978, 143). When after World War II the concept of race had become discredited in political and academic discourse and notions of racial inferiority were replaced by references to cultural difference, the presence of (post-)migrants became evaluated in terms of their greater or lesser compatibility with European values. As Lentin (2000, 96–97) has pointed out, these older (“race”) and newer (“culture”) forms of racialization function in similar ways. Nineteenth-century claims of European superiority were not only grounded in alleged biological, phenotypical or genetic differences, but also referred to behavioral markers (see Stoler 1992, 538 for the Dutch East Indies), while cultural difference has easily become essentialized and naturalized.

Racialization then refers to processes of sorting the population and producing and naturalizing hierarchical difference on the basis of a wide range of elements such as descent, history, culture, phenotype, language and religion.<sup>5</sup> One site where gendered racialization has played out is through the body. Focusing on the centrality of gender in processes of racialization, Brah (1993) argues that both racial difference and sexual difference are not naturally given, but use “the figure of the body as the bearer of immutable difference whether or not this putative difference is represented as biological or cultural” (1993, 13). As a relational process, this includes both those who are made visible and those remaining invisible. That is, when Muslims are turned into the marked category, this simultaneously produces the non-Muslim majority population as neutral, as the unmarked category, as the European (post-)Christian, secular self. Returning to the body, this invites an engagement with how “the religious/ Islamic body” and “the secular body” co-constitute each other (Amir-Moazami 2016; Scheer et al. 2019). As the case about face-veiling indicates, this does not only work through discourse, but also through perception, affective responses and sensibilities, that accumulate and are internalized over time (Fassin 2011, 430; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Ngo 2016, 854).

Like Orientalism, racialization is also always about the operation of power. As a political act, an act of power, those in a position of authority are able to categorize and define others, and to impose an identity on them, with the latter precluded from opting for other forms of identifica-

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5. There is an extensive literature on the racialization of Muslims in Europe, such as Garner and Selod (2015), Meer (2013), and Sayyid and Wakil (2010). Some of this work includes a comparison of Islamophobia and antisemitism (for instance, Jansen and Meer 2020; Renton and Gidley 2017).

tion (Fanon 1952; Hall 2017, 81). Racialization is, moreover, not simply an individual act, it involves, what Fassin calls objectification through interventions by “a third party,” for instance, politicians and statisticians (2011, 425). When responding to such impositions, those at the lower end of the social hierarchy are often faced with “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007), that is, their knowledge, including their experiential knowledge, is easily disqualified because of their social identity. This strongly resonates with the experiences of face-veiling women.

Individuals and groups become racialized in different ways. Wertheim (2020) makes an important distinction between two modes of racialization. In some cases, it entails a sense of European superiority, a developmental perspective with others defined as lagging behind. In other cases, it refers to undesirable competitors, who do not evoke feelings of disdain or pity, but rather of envy and resentment, that push towards their exclusion. When (post-)migrants become better educated and upward socially mobile the ways in which they are racialized may shift from the former to the latter. Next to this, racialized categories such as Muslims may also be subdivided into those that are more and those that are less acceptable to the majority public. The boundaries between these categories are unstable and context-dependent, historically and locally specific (Bader *et al.* 2011). In contemporary liberal secular settings in Europe, the former often refers to liberal, moderate, or cultural Muslims, and the latter to conservative, Salafi-oriented, or radical Muslims (De Koning 2020; Kundnani 2014; Mamdani 2004). As will become evident below, racialization may also be layered, with Muslims themselves involved in such processes of racializing others.

In the following, I start with a brief chronology of debates on a ban of face-veils and discuss how covering the face, signified as a highly undesirable sartorial practice, has become the object of law making. The next sections focus on three master narratives about face-veiling: as gendered oppression which defines face-veiling women as victims of their own men; as a security risk, which turns these women into an objective or subjective threat to the safety of the public; and as an obstacle to integration, which frames them as actively refusing to participate in society. As it turns out, there are major tensions and contradictions between these master narratives, on the one hand, and the largely unheard narratives of the women concerned, who experience and signify face-veiling very differently, on the other hand. Analyzing these differential significations of face-veiling, I explore how racialization not only works through

rational debate but also draws on affective sensibilities. The last section briefly reflects on the aftermath of the 2019 partial ban on face-coverings and, with the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic, on the partial obligation to wear face-masks.

### **Problematizing Muslims and face-veiling**

The face-veil did not simply emerge as a problem in need of intervention, face-veiling was actively turned into such a problem as part of the broader process of problematizing the public presence of Islam in the Netherlands since the early 1990s (Bacchi 2015). Governing Muslims was not a new phenomenon for the Dutch state; from 1800 until 1945 the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) was under Dutch colonial state rule. The more recent problematization of Muslims centers, however, by and large on a different category, that is the labor migrants of the 1960s, and those taking part in the subsequent family reunification programs. First labelled as “guest workers,” these migrants and their descendants were quickly recategorized in government documents as “ethnic minorities,” as allochthonous, and more recently as “of migrant background,” always with subdivisions differentiating between “Western” and “non-Western” (Geschiere 2009; Yanow and Van der Haar 2013).<sup>6</sup>

Starting in the 1980s and increasingly from the early 1990s on, in public debate migrants from Muslim majority countries increasingly came to be referred to as Muslims. Whereas this made sense when the focus was on their activities in the religious field, such as when establishing mosques or when they used this term as a form of self-identification, it soon included anyone from a Muslim majority country. Once categorized as Muslims they then became caught up in the “civilizational struggle” between Islam and the West (Huntington 1993), in which Islam was constructed as incompatible with European values, and became associated

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6. Allochthonous is contrasted with autochthonous, which means “of the land,” “indigenous,” “native.” The Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics labels someone as autochthonous or allochthonous based on place of birth of oneself or one’s (grand)parents, while those born in the Netherlands, but with one parent born abroad are called “second generation allochthonous.” It also distinguishes between Western versus non-Western allochthonous by referring to country or continent of birth, the latter including those born in Turkey, Asia (except Indonesia and Japan), Africa, and Latin-America. In 2016 the term “allochthonous” was replaced by “person with a migration background,” but the definitions did not change (Yanow and Van der Haar 2013, 238). Currently, debates are ongoing about discontinuing the use of the categories Western versus non-Western.

with a host of societal problems.<sup>7</sup> This was the more so after 9/11 and the huge shift in the Dutch political landscape the first years of the new century with the rapid rise of populist anti-Islam parties. Led by Pim Fortuyn and later by Geert Wilders, these parties who also introduced a far more confrontational political style, claiming to express the feelings of “ordinary autochthonous (white native Dutch) people” against a cosmopolitan elite (Prins 2002). The argument that migrants would only integrate if Dutch national identity was more firmly established gained ground. This turn to ethnonationalism and the culturalization of citizenship also turned policy making more assimilationist (Geschiere 2009; Slootman and Duyvendak 2015).<sup>8</sup> Face-veiling as topic of debate stands out in that it brought together a highly diverse national majority attempting to criminalize a tiny minority of Muslim women

The starting point of the public debate on face-veiling was when in 2003 a school for adult education in Amsterdam had prohibited three young Muslim women who had recently started to wear a face-veil from entering the school. This case turned out to be paradigmatic for what was to come. Claiming discrimination on the basis of religion, the women involved turned to the Equal Treatment Commission (CGB).<sup>9</sup> The school then presented the counter argument that it prohibited *any* kind of face covering because this impedes communication, hinders identification, and poses a security risk. Using the neutral term “face-covering” it avoided the accusation of direct discrimination on the basis of religion, which is unconstitutional.<sup>10</sup> The Equal Treatment Commission agreed with the school and from

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7. In the Netherlands arguments about the incompatibility of Islam with European values were already presented by Frits Bolkestein in his speech at the Liberal International in Luzern in 1991 (NRC, 21 September 1991), and by Paul Scheffer (prominent Labour Party ideologue) in his article “The multicultural drama” (NRC, 29 January 2000).
  8. The cabinet’s 2011 Memorandum of Integration officially declared the end of Dutch multicultural society.
  9. CGB case no. 2003–40 ([www.mensenrechten.nl/publicaties/oordelen/2003-40](http://www.mensenrechten.nl/publicaties/oordelen/2003-40)). This Commission monitors compliance with the Dutch Equal Treatment Act, which prohibits discrimination in education and employment on grounds of religion, sex, race, or political orientation. It does so by responding to complaints in the format of a non-binding ruling that is, however, taken seriously in court cases. On 2 October 2012 this Commission has become part of The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights ([www.mensenrechten.nl](http://www.mensenrechten.nl)).
  10. Although the school ruling could still be considered *indirect* discrimination, as it disproportionately affects adherents of a particular religion, in that case “objective justifications” may make such a ruling necessary. The arguments the school presented



then on institutions were able to ban face-coverings if they used the correct wording and arguments. There were no calls for additional legislation.

Things had turned very different by the end of 2005. After the murder of Theo van Gogh in late 2004, the societal climate had further polarized and anti-Muslim sentiments were widely present. When Wilders proposed a parliamentary resolution, requesting that the Cabinet take steps “to prohibit the public use of the *burqa* in the Netherlands,” a parliamentary majority voted in favor.<sup>11</sup> The proposed ban was evidently not a solution to concrete societal problems. When Wilders announced his plans to table his resolution in an interview with a popular daily, the reporter added “Until now there has not been a discussion about face-veils on the streets” (*De Telegraaf* 10 September 2005). Also, politicians who recognized that such a “*burqa*-ban” would be unconstitutional, stated they would nonetheless vote in favor of such a ban, as it would at least start the discussion about this issue (*NRC*, 21 December 2005). In the years to come, face-veiling only emerged as a topic of debate when politicians or parliamentarians actively turned it into a problem (Moors 2009, 396). In other words, face-veiling had become a strong case of symbolic politics.

A general ban on face-veiling never materialized as it was irreconcilable with the Dutch constitutional right to religious freedom. However, face-veiling remained a topic of parliamentary debate and national policy making. By 2008 the new center-left coalition government expressed its intention to implement a partial ban on face-covering (in education, for civil servants, and in public transport). In the years to come, depending on the composition of the coalition government, parliamentarians either worked towards the implementation of a general ban or of a number of functional bans.

In spite of the attempts to present these law proposals in neutral terms (“all face-coverings”), it was obvious that face-veiling women were the real target; even in parliamentary debates the term “*burqa* ban” was frequently used. As will be discussed later, the lines of demarcation were not drawn between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between a large majority in favor of some kind of a ban and an exceedingly small group of between 150–400 face-veiling women and their supporters. Throughout these years, many Muslims, especially those in a position of authority, did not oppose such a partial ban. The main Muslim representative body (CMO)

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were accepted as such.

11. Parliamentary document TK 29754, no. 41 <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29754-41.html>.

in the Netherlands, in fact, cooperated with the government in devising the partial ban.

When it became evident that in spite of the objections by the Council of State, the ban on face-coverings was moving towards implementation, face-veiling women themselves started to mobilize against the ban. In 2015 Karima Rahmani started the Facebook group *Hands Off My Niqab*, but at the time support remained limited.<sup>12</sup> In August 2019, the partial ban finally became law, with “partial” now extended to all educational and health institutions, all governmental building, and public transport.

### **Muslim women’s oppression: contrasting arguments and sentiments**

A major argument used in debates about face-veiling is that it is a symbol of, or a tool for women’s oppression. Geert Wilders has been a major protagonist of such a point of view. Having introduced the term *burqa* in law making when he tabled his 2005 resolution, in his 2008 law proposal, he labelled wearing the *burqa* as “diametrically opposed to modernity,” as expressing the rejection of “essential Western values and norms, including the equality of men and women,” as “a symbol of the oppression of women, irrespective of whether the *burqa* or the *niqab* is worn by force or by choice” and as “an obstacle for the emancipation and integration of women in Dutch society.”<sup>13</sup> Such arguments were often used in public and media debates, as the vignettes already indicated.

What matters here is that the Dutch public was already familiar with the term *burqa* when Wilders first used it. Media reports on the war in Afghanistan, had often highlighted how the *burqa* was the embodiment of women’s gender oppression under the Taliban regime (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). While in the years to come, the use of the term *burqa* became increasingly common, face-veiling women in the Netherlands either employed the Dutch term for face-veil (*gezichtssluier*) or the Arabic term *niqab*. Their style of covering the face was very different from the *burqa* (an all-enveloping Afghan-style garment with a mesh in front of the eyes), and far more similar to the kinds of face-veil worn in Egypt or the Gulf States, a piece of cloth covering (part of) the face.

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12. Two Muslim grassroot organizations consistently expressed their opposition against the ban: the older Muslim women’s organization *al-Nisa* and the more recently formed association, *Report Islamophobia*.

13. Parliamentary document TK 31108, nr 3. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-31108-3.html>.

Face-veiling women themselves strongly distanced themselves from the idea that they did so pressured or forced by their family or husband.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, they often highlighted that parents and husbands had attempted to discourage or even prohibit them from wearing a face-veil. They signified covering the face as an act of worship, as submission to God and as a step on the path to become a more pious Muslim. Drawing on different registers to present their motivations, some would use highly affective language, referring to their strong love for God or their desire to experience again the intense feeling of being in love with Islam. Others pointed to how acquiring Islamic knowledge had convinced them of the religious value of covering the face. Some also referred to a desire not to be exposed to the male gaze. All agreed that for face-veiling to work as a God-pleasing act, it had to be worn with the right intention, not as a hype, a fashion, or because of social pressure.

When arguing against the ban on face-veiling the women shifted from a religious discourse of submission to God, to a liberal discourse of equal rights and freedom of choice. They pointed out that the ban did not only violate their freedom of religion, but also their right as women to freely choose what to wear. Such a combination of a religious discourse as motivating force and a liberal discourse of autonomous choice is similar to how observant Muslim women in Western Europe more generally have argued for their right to engage in religious practices (Jouili 2015; Jacobsen 2011; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Amir-Moazami 2016, 165).

But how to understand the widely shared association of face-veiling with women's oppression? That the act of covering part of the face becomes signified as a sign of oppression is not self-evident.<sup>15</sup> Such a signification is produced through the figure of "the Muslim woman"; it is her engagement in this act that turns it suspicious. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary discourse of saving Muslim women "from their own men" has a long colonial genealogy. As a result, dominant modes of perception amongst the majority public have already marked the veiled Muslim woman as oppressed. With her body overdetermined at the moment

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14. I started ethnographic fieldwork with face-veiling women in 2007, and have continued participant observation (engaging in informal conversations and observations) off and on throughout the following years. I also conducted topical life-story interviews with over twenty women who either wore a face-veil, had done so previously, or were seriously considering doing so.

15. Amongst the Tuareg, for instance, men cover their faces, yet this is not considered as evidence of their gendered oppression.

of perception, it became virtually impossible for her to be heard (Al-Saji 2010).

Time and place also matter. In the Netherlands, a particular historical figuration makes it difficult for the liberal secular majority to accept that women may opt for living an observant religious life. Prior to the 1960s the Netherlands had been organized, both politically and in everyday life, through a system of pillarization, with society segregated along religious and to a lesser extent ideological affiliations.<sup>16</sup> With the emergence of the welfare state, the 1960s became a period of very rapid deconfessionalization, of a cultural youth revolution, a turn to consumer culture and a broader process of individualization. In the Muslim world, in contrast, starting in the 1970s the Islamic revival movement gained momentum. This also was to engender a growing public presence of Islam in Europe, and in the Netherlands brought back memories of the now rejected older system of pillarization (Van der Veer 2006). The 1960s were, moreover, also the beginnings of the sexual revolution, with women's emancipation increasingly linked to sexual freedom and the public visibility of the female body. While feminists often remained skeptical, wearing more revealing styles of dress became a sign of progress, with more covered formats labelled as conservative and discordant with modern, secular life. In the course of time, the covered Muslim body (with the face-veiled body as its epitome) became strongly marked as constrained and oppressed in stark contrast to the secular body, defined as free and autonomous.<sup>17</sup>

Gendered racialization is, however, more complex than simply a contrast between Muslims and non-Muslims. First of all, similar sentiments, that is fears of the return to a restrictive undesirable past, are also present amongst Muslims, especially those considering themselves as secularist, modern, and progressive. To them face-veiling women represent the threat of a conservative or undesirable political Islam as present in their or their parents' countries of origin. Secondly, the divide between the secular uncovered and the Muslim covered body is in itself multilay-

16. Pillarization refers to a particular mode of managing difference. Society is divided between vertically integrated communities ("pillars"), Protestants, Roman Catholics, liberal humanists and later socialists. Each of these pillars functioned as a segregated entity with its own institutions, while the elites engaged in a corporatist politics of accommodation and pacification (Lijphard 1968). Van Rooden (1996, 169ff) refers to this with the term the ethnicization of religion.

17. This is similar to Scott's (2007, 162) analysis that French society is engaged in a civilizing mission to enable Muslim women to be "free to display their bodies and experience the joys of sex – as French society (women and men) understood them."

ered.<sup>18</sup> Not all styles of covering are similarly signified as conservative and threatening. Starting in the later 1990s—and even earlier in countries such as Turkey—highly fashionable covered styles of Muslim dress emerged, which shared similarities with mainstream fashion. The emergence of such fashionable, yet recognizably Muslim styles of dress simultaneously turned those wearing the more sober, plain, loose, and unfashionable styles of Muslim dress into an even more negatively marked category (Moors and Tarlo 2013).

The wide divergence in the signification and evaluation of face-veiling between those involved in this practice and the majority population, is not only grounded in an ethical-moral position, but has also affective and aesthetic qualities. The women themselves point to the beauty of fully covering, appreciate the simplicity of an outfit in one or at most two colors, call it fascinating and complete, and express how they love the flow of the loose garments worn with face-veils. The majority public, in contrast, expressed a strong dislike of the sight of face-veiling, using terms such as ugly, horrible, frightening, and “a terrible sight.” Such feelings of discomfort or even disgust are not natural or self-evident. As mentioned in the above, they are strongly linked to the long historical presence of the figure of the Muslim woman. When those in a position of authority, such as parliamentarians, express and reiterate such feelings, linking the face-veil to oppression and undesirable forms of Islam, this further contributes to the circulation of such feelings and their normalization. Such a form of racialization is strongly relational. It does not only label an act and those engaged in it as “disgusting,” but also “generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event” (Ahmed 2004, 82, 94)

### **A security risk: Whose safety is at stake?**

Face-veiling women are not only defined as oppressed but also as a security risk and hence as object of the security discourse. In the 1990s, the Netherlands had already witnessed a gradual securitization of society, which also included increasing concerns about subjective feelings of security (Cesari 2009; De Graaf 2011, Fadil et al. 2019). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Islamic radicalization became ever more the focus of policy making, first after the murder of Theo van Gogh in November 2004 by a Moroccan-Dutch young man who claimed to have done so on reli-

18. Moreover, also some non-Muslims reject the sexualized presence of women's bodies, varying from conservative Protestants to committed feminists.

gious grounds, and then again when after 2012 a small group of young men and women left to jihadi-held areas in Syria (De Koning, Becker and Roex 2020).

Security had already been used as an argument to ban face-coverings in the 2003 school case, and it was during a parliamentary debate on radicalization that Wilders had announced his intention to table a resolution to “ban the *burqa*.” Realizing that references to religion would impede legislation, other politicians using the “neutral” term face-coverings foregrounded security and public order as arguments for a ban.<sup>19</sup> However, in the years to come the sectors involved, such as the security services, border control, the police, and public transportation, by and large did not support a ban. They did not consider face-veiling women a particular security risk and argued that current legislation – such as the use of house rules – was sufficient to maintain public order. Still, the growing emphasis on security made the argument that individuals who appear in the public need to be identifiable more acceptable, allowing for a rapid growth of various forms of camera surveillance. The development of such technologies of surveillance, including face recognition, further contributes to the perception of face-veiled bodies as suspect and a potential threat. In these discussions about security, it is remarkable that no attention has been paid to the safety of face-veiling women themselves. The latter did not only report that they were regularly called names and faced with other forms of abuse when appearing in public, but also that this became particularly prevalent when politicians turned face-veiling into a topic of debate.

The notion that covering the face is a subjective threat to security, is grounded in hegemonic ideas about the kinds of bodies whose presence is seen as desirable or undesirable in public space. One central assumption is that we need to be able to see each others’ face. This was already explicitly stated in the 8 February 2008 Cabinet letter, which brings together assumptions about face-veiling, open communication, citizenship, living together, and Islam in ways that are still current. Considering open communication as crucial to facilitate interaction, the Cabinet letter explains that “the mutual acceptance of difference and commonality emerges when people are able to get to know and relate to each other without hindrance. Wearing face coverings strongly impedes such open communication.” The Cabinet letter underlines its “responsibility to guarantee such open communication where that is essential for the development

19. See Parliamentary Document TK 31331, no1-3, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/dossier/31331>

and functioning of the democratic rule of law” and then turns to Islam through the figure of the Muslim woman:

There are specially tensions around issues that are related to [trends] in Islam [...]. It is therefore necessary to also address Islamic face coverings, such as the *burqa* and the *niqab*, in discussions about face coverings [...]. [These] evidently hinder open communication, [...] are considered as women unfriendly, and to many these are a symbol of a fundamentalist Islam that does not suit Dutch society.

After observing that this style of dress also evokes in many “a feeling of anxiety and unsafety,” the letter concludes, “The Cabinet considers open communication between citizens, participation and equal chances for men and women essential values of Dutch society and our democratic rule of law.”<sup>20</sup>

Later debates on the partial ban use similar argument, but in addition underline the importance of the locational settings where the ban would be implemented, referring to service providing and recognizability. Explaining the motivations for the partial ban, the government stated in 2019 that

[i]n some locations it is important for providing services and security that people can look at each other and can recognize each other, such as in public transportation and governmental buildings, education and health care. This are locations where people come together and cannot avoid each other.

While emphasizing that in the Netherlands each person is allowed to dress the way they want as long as this does not infringe on the freedom of others, the statement ended with “This freedom is limited in locations where communication is indispensable for [good] qualitative service providing or social safety.”<sup>21</sup>

Whereas one may question whether forced unveiling enhances the quality of services provided, these statements also point to a host of assumptions about the work the face does. Seeing the face of the other as necessary for open communication is based on the notion that the face reveals

20. Letter to parliament of 8 February 2008 that argued for specific, functional bans of face-covering, parliamentary document TK 2007/08 31 200 VII, Nr. 48, 8 February 2008. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-31200-VII-48.html>

21. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gezichtsbedekkende-kleding-in-de-media-boerkaverbod/vraag-en-antwoord/waarom-is-er-een-gedeeltelijk-verbod-op-gezichtsbedekkende-kleding/>



one's inner state of being, feelings and emotions. Yet, not only verbal, but also non-verbal forms of communication are learned. Faces do not only reveal but may also conceal, something that the public may well appreciate when it concerns emotions such as anger. The face is also never seen "in isolation." Impressions about others also involve such visual aspects as body language and styles of dress, as well as other senses, such as the aural. Moreover, differently positioned publics may experience and signify particular styles of appearing in the public in quite divergent ways. What some may consider ugly or threatening, others may see as beautiful and attractive.

In the particular settings where the partial ban is implemented, something else is also at stake. In the fields of education or health, the dialogical possibility of discourse is particularly important.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, in public debate, claims that it is necessary to see the other's face stand in tense relation to the argument that the focus should be on the substance of the arguments presented, rather than the appearance and the social identity of the person making the argument.

It is, however, not simply the figure of the Muslim women as oppressed who needs to be saved or face-veiling as a security threat that produces a sense of discomfort in the majority public. What matters most is the tension or even dissonance that occurs when these two frames come together. The very same women who are defined as victims of their own men actively and provocatively challenge Dutch normativities about how the female body should appear in the public and refuse to be saved. The sense of discomfort this tension produces is further heightened by the material effects of face-veiling: face-veiling women are able to see the faces and bodies of others, but the public is not able to see them in a similar, reciprocal manner. In covering the face, these women then invert relations of power, that are both gendered and racialized. They go against the convention that those in a position of power are allowed to remain invisible, while those in a subaltern position are obliged to allow others to surveil and scrutinize them. These tensions become palpable when a face-veiling woman does not only appear in the public, but also speaks on stage. It are such incongruencies that produce a sense of discomfort, that may also turn into resentment and anger.

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22. Whereas some refer to Levinas, and his use of "the face of the other" as an argument to ban face-veils, Taylor (2006) explains how Levinas uses "the face" metaphorically, and is actually highly suspicious of the visual and far more positive about the aural in order to argue against polarized alterity and to avoid reducing the other to the self.



### The trouble with integration

Whether face-veils work as an obstacle to communication in face-to-face encounters, such as in health care or education, depends very much on the willingness of both parties to communicate. This became evident from conversations with members of staff at the only university department where two face-veiling students had been registered in 2003. When discussing face-veiling in general, some members of staff mentioned problems with communication. Yet, when turning to their individual experiences with these two students, most did not report problems, and those who did, raised a different set of issues. It was not communication per se that was deemed problematic, but that these women refused “to accept our values,” did not want to make an effort to participate and integrate in society, and “purposely and provocatively set themselves apart” (Moors 2009, 405). In short, the issue was framed as part of the discourse on integration. Confronted with arguments about their refusal to participate, face-veiling women themselves pointed out that their lifestyle, with a high value attached to acquiring religious knowledge and caring for the family, is rather similar to the ideals of some conservative Christian women. Moreover, it is the ban itself, excluding them from access to education, health care, public transport, and public buildings, that makes it nearly impossible to participate in society as equal citizens.

These comments then bring us back to the trouble with integration. As already briefly referred to, the integration discourse is an important technology to racialize minorities. It is only those with a migrant background (previously labelled “allochthones”) who need to integrate, while the autochthonous population has “received a dispensation of integration” (Schinkel 2013, 1155-6). In population statistics, racialization is then extended into the future with also the so-called second generation (ironically born in the Netherlands) included in the integration discourse. The wider public, in turn, treats also those who are recognizably Muslim, yet do not fit the statistical definition “of migrant background,” as objects of the integration discourse. White Dutch women who converted to Islam often report that after conversion and especially after they start to wear a headscarf, they are no longer seen as part of the nation, epitomized in such verbal abuse as “go back to your own country” (Vroon-Najem and Moors 2021)

This racialized integration discourse is one more indication of how religion, race and ethnicity may be employed in very similar ways to produce naturalized, hierarchical difference. As many have argued before, pro-

cesses of othering are inherent to the concept of the nation-state, both in Europe and beyond (Appadurai 2006; Bauman 1999; Geschiere 2009; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Nation-states are constructed around a variety of concepts, such as common roots, a shared language, culture, religion, and history. The process of nation-state formation, turning multiple ethnic and religious communities into a nation with sovereignty over a particular territory often engenders the hegemony of one particular ethno-religious group as unmarked with others turned into minoritized groups as the marked category. The case of the ban on face-veiling indicates that this has gained further momentum when state policies turned increasingly assimilationist. The net result is that public discourse and national policy making have placed increasingly high demands on Muslims in particular to prove their belonging to the nation and their loyalty to the state. Such a turn to shared values goes well together with an affective turn in public debate, with the use of a strongly affective language and references to feelings of discomfort, disgust, fear, and resentment among the majority public as grounds for legal intervention.

### Implementing the ban and COVID-19 face-masks

On 1 August 2019 the partial ban on face coverings was implemented. Although it was in the middle of the summer vacation, it drew a lot of public attention. One reason was that the day before its implementation a national newspaper had published a long and detailed article in which it explained how to make a citizen's arrest, that included the option to physically restrain a person until the police would arrive (*Algemeen Dagblad* 31 July 2019). This did not only lead to online suggestions to go and look for face-veiling women to arrest, but also to something very different. It was the starting point of a host of new initiatives to protest the ban and to protect face-veiling women. Facebook groups such as the *Boerka Buddies* emerged that offer support and protection for face-veiling women in public space, and two young face-veiling women launched *Hand in Hand Against the Niqab Ban* in order to organize a protest against it.<sup>23</sup> Both initiatives, as well as others, brought together Muslims and non-Muslims in joint activism against the ban, while also a growing number of mainstream Muslim associations became more critical of the ban. In parliament, however, the Christian Democrats strongly censured the fact that face-veiling women had the audacity to call for a protest against the ban.

23. <https://www.facebook.com/boerkabuddies/> and <https://www.facebook.com/handinhandtegenhetniqabverbod/>.

Not appreciating their active participation in political action, this party argued that as the law had been passed, it should simply be adhered to.

Although one year after the ban was implemented only four warnings and no fines had been issued (*De Volkskrant* 21 October 2020), this hugely underestimates the effects of the ban. It was up to the sectors themselves to implement the ban, and both some mayors and the police had made it clear that violations of the face-veiling ban were low on their list of priorities, while also the public transport sector expressed its concerns. Yet sections of the public now felt ever more entitled to act. Face-veiling women reported increased harassment (mostly verbal but sometimes also physical), not only in those locations where wearing a face-veil was prohibited, but also where this was not the case, such as on the street or in playgrounds. Such forms of aggression also spilled over to women who were only wearing *hijab* (covered dress without a face-veil).<sup>24</sup> The ban also led to polarization, because security guards, bus drivers, and other “street level” enforcers may find themselves at the center of disputes about whether to act or not. When a parliamentary debate was held a few months after the implementation of the ban, the large majority of parliamentarians expressed concern about aggression vis-à-vis those trying to implement the ban. Threats to the safety of face-veiling women were hardly mentioned.

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus in the Netherlands, starting in March 2020, sheds new light on the situation. The Netherlands was very late with regulating the wearing of face-masks. The Outbreak Management Team (OMT) – the official advisory body for the Cabinet – had maintained the position that there is no evidence that wearing a non-medical face mask protects against the dissemination the virus. At the same time, wearing medical face-masks was strongly discouraged, as there was a huge shortage of such masks, so these should remain reserved for medical personnel. Finally, on 1 June 2020 wearing a non-medical face-mask that would cover the mouth and the nose, became mandatory in public transportation, because keeping distance may not always be possible there.<sup>25</sup>

24. For cases see the report that the grass roots organization *Report Islamophobia* has published on 21 September 2020. This report evaluates the effects of the “burqa ban” and calls for its repeal. See <https://www.meldislamofobie.org/press-release-burqa-ban-report/>

25. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2333081-van-dissel-heeft-begrip-voor-mondkapjesplicht-maar-blijft-kritisch> (Van Dissel understands mandatory face-masks but remains critical)

This then produced a conundrum. Wearing face-coverings in public transportation is prohibited, whereas wearing a non-medical face mask has become obligatory. It is true that the ban on face-coverings allows for an exception for the sake of protecting public health, yet passengers were discouraged from wearing medical face-masks so that claim could not be made. Not surprisingly, the question also emerged whether wearing a face-veil would now be permissible in public transportation. Whereas a proposal to temporarily lift the partial ban on face-coverings was rejected by a large majority in parliament, the public transportation authorities have generally tolerated face-veils, even if some face-veiling women had to actively protest efforts to prohibit them from using public transportation. In a few cases, women wearing covered dress and large headscarves have also become involved in arguments because street level enforcers considered their cloth face-mask to resemble a face-veil too closely (also *Algemeen Dagblad* 18 June 2020).

Some have argued that wearing a face-veil will become less controversial because people have become used to the presence of face-masks in public. It is evident that wearing face-masks, which is far more widespread with the COVID-19 pandemic than face-veiling ever was, has not led to security problems. It may hinder communication to some extent, but it is also obvious that communication remains possible, especially in face-to-face situations, and that in spite of the requirement to keep physical distance. Moreover, COVID-19 may push us to further unpack common-sense notions about the need to see the face for meaningful communication. The ubiquitous online meetings that expose us continuously to close-ups of our own face and that of others, may well engender a hyperconsciousness about visual appearances that may hinder rather than facilitate a focus on communicating substance.

What matters most is how various publics signify wearing a face-mask. There is a rather sharp divide between, on the one hand, those who consider wearing a face-mask as a sign of taking responsibility, of caring for others and preventing the spread of the virus and, on the other hand, those who consider wearing a face-mask as a sign that we have lost our freedom and have given in to an increasingly authoritarian state. Whereas those who consider wearing face masks as an act of care, value wearing a face mask positively, those who consider face masks an imposition by a state that has violated their basic freedoms, consider wearing a face mask as cowardly submitting to such a state. Next to this, the signification of face-masks also depends on how particular bodies are already racial-

ized. A black man wearing a face-mask is more easily seen as representing a threat than a white man with a face-mask, while a woman wearing covered dress and a face-mask is still often perceived as oppressed or a provocation, something that would not happen if she did not wear a headscarf.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

Debates about face-veiling in the Netherlands are a strong instantiation of how Muslims in Europe have become racialized and how majority publics have turned a particular Muslim practice into a problem in need of intervention. Racialization as a process of sorting and categorizing populations, producing and naturalizing hierarchical difference, involves a struggle about signification and an investigation of how particular actors are able to impose their defining power on others. That signification matters is evident in the divergent ways in which the majority public and face-veiling women evaluate face-veiling.

These debates point to the need to engage with the particularities of the problematized practice and its practitioners. As this case indicates, the boundaries between those racializing others and those being the object of racialization are not clear-cut or stable. The racialization of face-veiling women does not divide the public between Muslims, on the one hand, and non-Muslims, on the other, but unites a wide range of protagonists, including Muslims, in targeting an exceedingly small number of face-veiling women. This indicates that also those who are themselves racialized, may be involved in racializing others, and in doing so contribute to the divide between more and less acceptable Muslims. In a similar vein, protests against the ban are not structured along lines of religious adherence; also non-Muslims have become involved in supporting face-veiling women.

As racialization is always contextual, time and place matter. In the post-1989 era Muslims have increasingly become the marked category, which, after the millennium, has been further enhanced by the growing presence of ethno-nationalism in debate and policy making. This has also become inscribed in the body, and produces a divide between the marked Muslim body and the unmarked, neutral secular body. In the case of face-veiling these divides are further complicated. In policy making, it is not the recognizably Muslim body that has been the central target, but a very specific category of Muslims, face-veiling women. In everyday life, however, such lines of demarcation may well become blurred. Aversion vis-à-

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26. See also Zine (2020).

vis face-veiling women may also extend to those simply wearing covered styles of dress (without a face-veil), while in an inverse development, those wearing highly fashionable styles of covered dress may be drawn into the category of the more acceptable Muslim.

As a moral discourse racialization is also strongly affective. Secular passions are evidently present in the highly emotive terms secular publics use in the debates (“disgusting”), that are linked to moral condemnation (“oppressive”) as well as to aesthetic judgements (“ugly”). These debates work with the assumption that the face-veiled body naturally produces particular sensations in the public. The analysis presented here complicates this. While recognizing that the figure of the Muslim woman is already overdetermined as oppressed, it also indicates that the affective language used, especially by persons in a position of authority, amplifies such sentiments. Moreover, the articulations of various master narratives produce forms of racialization that are ambivalent, as face-veiling women are simultaneously considered as victims to be saved and as a threatening, provocative presence to be removed from the public. The increasingly vocal presence of face-veiling women who actively defend their civil rights highlights such tensions. It is then not the act of covering the face that produces a sense of insecurity and obstructs communication, but what matters is who are engaged in face-veiling and how their motivations and intentions are signified. This is quite similar to how signification matters in the case of COVID-19 face-masks. Wearing such face-masks also evoked divergent emotions amongst the public depending on the actors involved and whether it is considered a sign of care for others or of submission to an unwarranted infringement of basic rights.

This then brings me back to my comment on high heels. As it turns out, face-veiling and wearing high heels are not only in some sense similar because only women wear them. Comparing these sartorial practices is also productive in another way. Whereas some may consider high heels a freely chosen style and a sign of energy, fun, and eroticism, others may consider wearing them a health hazard, a means to limit women’s mobility, and a sign of conforming to social pressure.<sup>27</sup> Just like face-veiling is

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27. Elma Drayer, a columnist of a Dutch daily, strongly rejected the comparison of high heels with face-veils, as in her view high heels represent fun and a lust for life (*De Volkskrant*, 21 July 2019). In her cultural history of high heels Brennan (2019), in contrast, has developed a far more critical view, emphasizing how high heels force women to walk slower and more carefully, and how women are expected to wear them in particular settings and profession.

signified and evaluated in divergent ways, the same is the case for wearing high heels.

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