

Arcadia University

**ScholarWorks@Arcadia**

---

Senior Capstone Theses

Undergraduate Research

---

Spring 4-29-2016

## **Less Than Agency: Religious Agency and the System of Disability**

Jasmyn Kopcsandy

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior\\_theses](https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior_theses)



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Kopcsandy, Jasmyn, "Less Than Agency: Religious Agency and the System of Disability" (2016). *Senior Capstone Theses*. 21.

[https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior\\_theses/21](https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior_theses/21)

This Capstone is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact [hessa@arcadia.edu](mailto:hessa@arcadia.edu), [correllm@arcadia.edu](mailto:correllm@arcadia.edu).

LESS THAN AGENCY:  
THE SYSTEM OF DISABILITY AND RELIGIOUS AGENCY

By

Jasmyn Kopcsandy

In Sociology

Submitted to the  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminal Justice  
Arcadia University

April 29, 2016

## ABSTRACT

In the following essay, I will attempt to extend the understanding of disability as a constitutive system – based on the social model of disability proposed by Mike Oliver – to the discussion of religious agency. I will first ground this theoretical application in a literature review with two areas of focus: (1) the dichotomy of modernity/secularism and religion, and (2) conceptualizations of agency. Specifically, my research question will be: how can “disability” as a category of analysis serve as a lens through which to analyze Western perceptions of religious agency in reference to Muslim women, and how does ableism shape Western, secular, feminist theories?

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Literature review I .....	8
Literature Review II .....	15
Theoretical Applications .....	23
Conclusions .....	32
Bibliography .....	34

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude goes to Dr. Ana Maria Garcia, who has been an invaluable teacher, mentor and friend over the last four years. Thank you for always believing in me.

I would also like to thank my mother, Lisa, and father, Kalman, as well Jonny, Ahmed, and Joe for motivating me and supporting me in so many different ways. Thank you for all your love.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the world has witnessed an explosion of media and academic attention directed towards Islam. Undoubtedly, a portion of this political frenzy resulted in increased global awareness and activism against the human rights violations occurring in the Middle East – including the forced wearing of the burqa amongst a plethora of other injustices. However, in many instances, the West’s “fascination” with Islam has quickly devolved into an insidious fear; a fear that manifests in bans against veiling, attacks on mosques, and violence against Muslims. Often, Muslim women bear the brunt of this violence, and are central in the discussions and debates that arise as a result of these incidents. This attention is characterized by an Orientalist preoccupation with veiled Muslim women, who stand as a “female symbol” of both the “oppressed woman” and the menacing threat facing Western<sup>1</sup> “secular” life (Fadil 2011: 84; Abu-Lughod 2002: 784).

Included amongst these debates are attempts to grapple with the motivations that drive Muslim women to veil. However, attention given to the “question” of veiling is often dominated by a limited framework of analysis that positions the act of veiling as either a rebellious, political statement, or dismisses it as a case of internalized patriarchal values. Although perhaps well intentioned, “Western”, non-Muslim theorizing about whether religious acts are agentic or not runs the risk of breaching dangerous territory. Such an endeavor ultimately denies Muslim women their agency and an opportunity to define the realities of their own experiences. Discussions about Muslim women (discussions that often occur in the absence of Muslim women themselves) are limited in scope, especially those that focus on the act of veiling: is the practice inherently oppressive or is there perhaps some liberating potential? Far too often, a diverse, complex practice such as veiling is reduced to shortsighted binaries, and theorists remain

constrained by their theoretical solutions: is the wearer making a political statement, resisting Western imperialism, or merely being subordinated and objectified? Or, a more radical suggestion, might the motivations to veil be “simply religious,” – motivated by a desire to serve God – as Sirma Bilge suggests (2010)? Indeed, religious motivation seems to pose quite a quandary for (white, secular) Western feminists who are quick to impose their values “retrospectively on material wholly different” from their own experiences (Hawthorne 2013: 179).

Important to note is that, within these discussions, the voices and agency of Muslim women are not heard or acknowledged – or perhaps more accurately, are ignored. In many feminist and academic circles, the mere possibility of a woman *desiring* “submission” to God is invalidated and, thus, their potential for agency is disregarded (Bilge 2010). My motivation for addressing the question of religious agency arises from troubling conversations I have had with fellow feminists and my academic peers, a number of whom have expressed a strong distaste for “religion” and/or a dismissal of the agency or intellectual ability of “religious” individuals. Such criticisms are particularly virulent towards Muslim women. A similar pattern is evident in certain media representations of Muslim individuals, which are often characterized by distinctly racialized, gendered, and ableist language. Additionally, my interest arises in response to grand narratives that dismiss religiosity as wholly oppressive, thus relegating pious individuals to the realm of “false consciousness” or “irrationality”. In fact, the dominantly held conception of “agency” within mainstream feminist discourse locates it as exclusive of religious belief, a line of thinking that is directly linked to the Enlightenment’s “rational” subject, rendering pious individuals as already unable to exercise their will (or have their will be taken seriously) (Bilge 2010). It is my opinion that arguments in this vein – those that disregard religious agency or the

intellectual capability of religious individuals – cannot evolve or constructively contribute to feminist conversations. Not only do such blind criticisms of religiosity have serious political consequences for those who are religious, but they are also dangerously silencing. The voice of a pious woman is rendered inaudible on account of her piety.

So, the question of agency remains. Not in the sense of, “is this agentic or not?”, but rather: *how* do we, as feminists of the West come to determine whether an act is agentic (an important question considering white, liberal, non-Muslim feminists typically dominate the conversation and become the self appointed voices of authority)? Further, *whose* choices get to be agentic, and how is this determined? Simply, what are the factors that contribute to understandings of what constitutes an act of agency – or rather, what constitutes an agent? The boundary between “agency” and “not-agency” is marked by race, gender, and class differences, but also by religiosity and perceived intellectual ability. Said boundary is often manifested in discussions surrounding Muslim women – made evident by the “debates” about religious motivation and perceived oppression mentioned above. These aspects of identity – an individual’s positioning in relation to the white, cismale, able-bodied norm – intertwine with modernity, secularism, and bodily autonomy to formulate Western understandings of Muslim women’s agency. More specifically, the process by which perceptions of a Muslim woman’s race, gender, and religiosity contributes to a conclusion made about the *ability* of the Muslim woman; a conclusion about their *ability* to choose independently, to think critically, to speak for themselves, and to resist oppression.

Important to note here is that I do not aim to make assumptions about the experiences of Muslim women. I wish to avoid a discussion as to whether or not veiling or religious belief is an effect of an oppressive patriarchal force, and I certainly do not wish to determine what behaviors



or practices *are* or are *not* acts of agency. Conversely, I will attempt to criticize the privileging of knowledge produced in white, western feminist scholarship and activism, of which I am a part. I intend for this work to serve partially as an exploratory exercise – a critical analysis of my own sociological/political/feminist practices as well as those of my peers as we are relatively positioned in white western academia. I was once advised to focus on my “homework” before attempting “fieldwork,” and I certainly do consider this project to be “homework” insofar as it is a reflective, introspective process that contributes to my own “unlearning” of the prejudices I will detail in the following pages.

Hence, I will attempt to criticize the processes by which those in the West (myself included) interpret religious acts as agentic or not, as well as an analysis of what racialized, gendered, and ableist notions of modernity, secularism, and bodily autonomy inform these interpretations. Indeed, the intersection of the “Muslim woman’s” (emphasis on the singular *woman*, as often the diverse population of Muslim *women* are reduced to an essentialized category) perceived racial characteristics, gender, and piety coagulate to form an already-constructed, essentialized subject whose choices are devalued, voice is denied, and roles in global knowledge production dismissed. My point is this: assumptions made about Muslim women’s agency or intellectual capability – informed by Western constructions of their race, gender, and religiosity – are shaped by ableism, and thus can produce a “disabling effect” in the sense that Muslim women are excluded from the realm of ‘rationality’, or barred from being considered legitimate producers of knowledge (Bilge 2010).

It is this “disabling effect” that will be the primary focus of this thesis, as specific understandings of ability and bodily autonomy – or just “the body” – dominate debates of religious agency, most poignantly in regards to Muslim women. For example, many scholars,

such as Sirma Bilge, Nadia Fadil, and Saba Mahmood, have critiqued the tendency for “agency” to be reduced to a synonym of “resistance”, arguing that such a narrow definition renders religious motivations invalid (Bilge 2010; Fadil 2011; Mahmood 2005). The binary analytical schema of “resistance” versus “subordination” severely limits possible conceptualizations of agency, many of which depend on a central “rational, free-willed, choosing agent” (Bilge 2010: 12; Mahmood 2005). A number of feminists have argued that such formulations of “agency” typically imply ‘a value judgment’ on the *content* of the act (Bilge 2010: 17; Fadil 2011; Abu-Lughod 2002). However, I would add, one’s capacity for agency is also determined by a value judgment on the *actor* themselves – informed by their race, gender, class, and, I will argue, their religiosity. Indeed, it is well understood that the “social processes” which create the hierarchy of bodies, “exalting some and abjecting others”, also dictate our understandings of those bodies and their abilities (Connell 2011: 1370). While gender, race, and class have long been understood as such signifiers of ability, I would add that religion can be thought of as yet another, and thus, the devaluation of religiosity and religious agency can be analyzed through disability theory. Such devaluation – or, disabling – of religious individuals is evident in depictions of Muslim women, who are often portrayed as a signifier of oppression, restricted bodily autonomy, submission, and irrationality.

Indeed, it is precisely the construction of the *bodies* of Muslim women – their perceived racial or gendered characteristics – that are central in the Western formulations of Muslim subjectivity and understandings of their agentic or intellectual capability. For example, veiled women are perceived as abnormal, not neutral, deviating from the Western, secular norm. This perception of the veiled/pious body has consequences for whether or not their choices are viewed as agentic, independent, or stemming from critical thought. The disregard for the agency of pious

women, the invalidation of their religious motivations, and their exclusion from the global production of knowledge are manifestations of the “disabling effect”: Due to essentializing interpretations of race and gender, and religiosity, Muslim women sit outside the realm of the rational, independent, modernist subject, and are, as a result, rendered abject, inaudible, and barred from social mobility (Corker & Shakespeare 2002). This pattern of exclusion bares a striking resemblance to the system of discursive conditions that assign legitimacy and “completeness to some bodies and deficiency to others” – the system of disability (Samuels 2002: 65).

The devaluation of certain racialized, gendered, and classed bodies has been well documented in feminist literature. The language of deficiency used to describe and invalidate racialized or gendered “others” has been frequently noted; for instance, femininity has historically been synonymous with weakness and blackness has been associated with the sub-human or the monstrous. Indeed, the systems of race, gender, and class are maintained by disparate constructions of worth. In recent decades, there has been a rise in scholarly attention given to this link between the systems of disability, race, gender and class. For instance, Raewyn Connell has noted that disability is intrinsically involved with “key processes that have formed world society” such as colonization, capitalism, and patriarchy (2011: 1369). Additionally, disability scholars Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear employ disability as a category of analysis – more than just a “magnifier” of oppression – in order to describe “how individuals located perilously at the interstices of race, class, gender, *and* disability” are abjected by heteronormative, white supremacist systems (Erevelles & Minear 2010).

However, the construction and othering of religiosity and pious individuals has been spared an analysis through the lens of disability. Yet, the “disabling effect” is arguably evident in

experiences of Muslim women who – because of their religiosity, their gender and their perceived race – are barred from entrance to modernity, from being considered rational and credible producers of knowledge, and dismissed as leading a valid life. Thinking of the system of disability as yet another process by which – following Rosemarie Garland Thomson – “all forms of corporeal diversity acquire the cultural meanings undergirding a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power”, opens up a number of possibilities for its application as a category of analysis (Thomson 1997). Reframing disability “as another culture-bound, physically justified’ system – in the same way that the systems of race, gender, and class have long been established – is useful in this discussion of religious agency in that it illuminates the function of “deficiency” and “deviancy” in subject determination within the secular, modern era (Thomson 1997).

Therefore, the following essay will demonstrate how the social and political exclusion of religious women – namely, for the sake of this essay, Muslim women – is evidence of how the system of disability permeates the secular West’s constructions of the religious “other” in particularly racialized and gendered ways. I intend to illustrate how Western constructions of the religious subject are maintained by the system of disability, and inform understandings of pious identity and legitimate subjectivity.

I will include an in-depth literature review with two areas of focus: (1) the dichotomy of modernity/ secularism versus religion, and (2) conceptualizations of agency. Then, drawing from the social model of disability proposed by Mike Oliver (2013), I will attempt to demonstrate how ableism is intrinsically involved in the construction of the racialized, gendered, and religious other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW I: THE DICHOTOMY OF MODERNITY AND RELIGION

The use of the term “Western” is problematic throughout sociological discourse in both in its ambiguity and implicit meanings. My use of the term is not intended to reinforce those implicit meanings but, rather, following Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is an attempt to draw attention to a specific discursive pattern that constructs “others as non-Western and hence, themselves as (implicitly) Western” (Mohanty 2003: 501). Such discursive strategies can be observed in Western sociological and/or feminist politics, and, as many argue, have evolved into a dangerously ethnocentric worldview. Of course, the non-West versus West dichotomy is not geographically specific nor is it homogenous. Yet, as a divisive strategy, it remains influential throughout the many stratifying structures and systems in the social world – an influence that manifests in the devaluation of certain lives, the abjection of certain bodies, and the exclusion of certain knowledges. Indeed, the division between what has been claimed as “Western” and what has been rejected as *not* has a profound influence on the lives of those subjected *to* and *by* the constructed divide.

Embedded within the division of West and non-West/East – and absolutely fundamental to its maintenance – are particular understandings of “modernity” and “religion” as oppositional and mutually exclusive realms of being. Indeed, the Western construction of religion operates “as a negative signifier” essential to the (re)production of the West vs. East conceptual opposition, *and* the associated implicit binaries which structure Western society and governmentality: public/private, secular/religious, and religion/state (Hawthorne 2013: 172). A number of writers have argued the assertion of an inherent philosophical and material distance

between the West and the supposed “atavism, despotism, and irrationality” of religion finds its roots in Enlightenment principles, and has become “core” to the Western worldview (see Butler et al. 2011; Hawthorne 2013: 172). In the words of disability theorists Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare: “at the heart of modernity is *the culture of the Enlightenment*” (emphasis in original) (2002: 2). Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that modernity, its connections to the Enlightenment, and most importantly its division from religion, is absolutely central to the European self-image. She points to the “discourse of developmentalism” that pervades discussions of the “third world” as evidence of the West’s “preoccupation with modernity” (1998: 7). The truth of this is made evident in modernist claims to “rationality”, “secularism”, and the pursuit of knowledge. Such claims exemplify the ways in which modernity is the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Sian Melvill Hawthorne offers an exploration of the relationship between Western modernity and religion born out of the Enlightenment in her essay, “Displacements: Religion, Gender, and the Catachrestic Demands of Postcoloniality” (2013). Hawthorne reminds us that the “story” of the West’s rejection and construction of religion is not simply about the conquest of religious belief, but is also quite telling about “what distinguishes the West from the rest” (2013: 171). Hawthorne states, during the colonial era, imperialist powers rejected the “atavism, despotism, and irrationality religion was taken to represent”, and thus asserted their philosophical and material distance and difference “from those non-western societies and cultures it set out to subjugate” (2013: 172). According to Hawthorne, the establishment of Western secularism marked an attempted diversion from the traditional “reliance on the erroneous reasoning” associated with religion in an effort to attain a “civilizing present” characterized by reason and rationality (2013: 173).

Of course, modernity and secularism are, in actuality, *not* exclusive of religion. Indeed, Hawthorne reminds us of the “religious origins of secular modernity” (Hawthorne 2013: 172). She writes, the exalting of human autonomy, rationality, and interiority – one of the “founding gestures of the Enlightenment” – would have been otherwise “unthinkable” without the Protestant Reformation, a movement that opened up previously off-limits subjects such as “faith” and “truth” to critique (2013: 172). Here – quite ironically, given the theorist’s own opinions about religious belief – Karl Marx’s reminder rings true: “everything [is] pregnant with its contrary” (1856). The evolving notions of “secularism” and “religion” which endlessly constitute not only “modern power and governance” but also one another are well documented by a number of theorists (Asad et al. 2009: 14).

For example, the recent collaborative work of Judith Butler with writers such as Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Jurgen Habermas has given a great deal of insight into the complexity of the relationship between the modern “secular” West and the construct of religion. In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Wendy Brown notes that the constructions of religion and secularism are truly amorphous, “interdependent and fluctuating” (Asad et al. 2009: 14). She states, to think that the two categories are not only exclusive of one another but are also stable, fixed concepts is misled. Mahmood’s contribution to the book, her essay, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide,” discusses secularism’s historical project in regulating and reforming religious belief “to yield a particular normative conception of religion . . . that is largely Protestant Christian in its contours” (2009: 87). Mahmood traces the history of Protestant missionaries, who experienced shock upon first encountering non-Christian natives who “attributed divine agency to material signs . . . [regarding them] as an ontological extension of themselves” (2009: 72). Such an attribution is a

direct affront to Protestant Christian sensibilities, which are guided by finite understanding of the separation between “inanimate objects, humans, and divinity” (2009: 73). Mahmood’s historical analysis reveals not only the long-standing ideological dissonances that characterize religious encounters, but also the way in which secularism grounded itself in, and thrives on, a project of regulating and reforming religion.

Historically, many theorists – including those within feminism – have reinforced this binary between religion and modernity. Even in modern feminism, religion has come to be known as a core structure contributing to the maintenance of patriarchy, one that legitimizes and justifies the oppression of women. Shadi Hamid offers an exploration of feminism’s seminal texts including foundational pieces by Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft – the arguments within which are heavily reliant on an aversion to religion and a specifically racialized discrediting of Islam. In his essay, “Between Orientalism and Postmodernism: The Changing Nature of Western Feminist Thought Towards the Middle East”, Hamid analyzes texts such as *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* and *The Second Sex* – both of which, he states, are “replete with casual references to the backwardness” and oppressive nature of Islam, the irrationality of Muslim women, and the violence of Muslim men (Hamid 2006: 78). Hamid observes dichotomizing language and logic in Wollstonecraft’s argument as she creates a binary between “subhuman” Muslim men – the oppressive and irrational, who treat Muslim women as “subordinate beings, and not part of the human species” – and European men who “rise above brute creation” and utilize their “improvable reason” (Wollstonecraft quoted in Hamid 2006: 79). Similarly, de Beauvoir likens the status of Muslim women to that of “slaves” – totally subordinate and “sequestered” beneath the pressing weight of Islam (de Beauvoir quoted in Hamid 2006: 79). Hamid observes that Muslim women represent the “passive,” “sexless,”



oppressed other in Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir's work – a kind of Orientalist imagery that implicitly constitutes the “women of the advanced West” as sexually liberated (2006: 79). Hamid characterizes this exalting of European men as echoing “Enlightenment-era language” (2006: 79).

Oddly, however, Hamid also resorts to these same oppositional tactics in an effort to discuss the “potential” for gender equality within Islam. Hamid comes to the strange conclusion that – in this respect – “the West can play a pivotal role” in reminding “the Muslim world of its own potential” so as not to become a “source for regression” (Hamid 2006: 91). Such an argument immediately reinforces the ideological and discursive pairing of liberalism, reason, rationality, and equality with the West. Indeed, by insinuating that the West has something to *teach* the Muslim world about rationality, freedom, and equality, Hamid not only ignores those Muslims that inhabit the locations deemed “Western” (thus reinforcing the West vs. Islam dichotomy) but also positions the West as that which other cultures deemed non-Western should aspire to. Hamid's reckless exalting of the West reinscribes the constructions of Islam as archaic and underdeveloped in comparison to Enlightened Europe. In response, we must remember, as Abu-Lughod insists, that it is crucial to avoid “polarization” that positions feminism, reason and “equality” “on the side of the West” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788).

Abu-Lughod argues in her famed essay, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others”, the “imaginative geography of the West versus East” can often be seen embedded within the dichotomy of “us versus Muslims” that has pervaded American discourse, particularly since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (2002: 784). Abu-Lughod reacts to Laura Bush's radio address in which she invoked ideas of “civilized people throughout the world” who look to the tragedies occurring throughout the

Middle East with feelings of pity (Abu-Lughod 2002: 784). Bush's language exemplifies the way in which the world has been "artificially" divided into "separate spheres" – West versus East, "civilized" versus not (2002: 784). Similarly, Sirma Bilge argues that these dichotomies imply an inherent incompatibility of "European values" with Islam (Bilge 2010: 14). Indeed, Bilge notes "the construction of Muslims as essentially different" to Western subjects is pervasive and deeply embedded within the Western self-image (2010).

The claims of modernity to rationality and reason and its dismissal of religious belief force us to question the implicit assumptions made about personhood and subjectivity within the modern Western framework. Namely, if "being modern" relies on a "rational, independent subject", who, then, is left out, and what forms of knowledge are henceforth excluded (Abu-Lughod 1998; Corker & Shakespeare 2002: 2)? In response to the post/modernist project, it is imperative that we ask what or who "has been superseded, displaced, developed, denied or rejected" and why (Corker & Shakespeare 2002:2)?

Evidently, ableist constructions of religious belief have historically barred the pious individual from entrance into the realm of modernity. The disabling ideology of the Age of Reason, from which modernity is born, constructs the (non-white) (female) religious other as incapable, irrational, and inherently anti-modern – a voice to be disregarded as illegitimate, an actor whose agency is thought to be *less than* the modern standard. Additionally, Nadia Fadil argues, there is also a "sexualized dimension" to this discursive boundary drawing, as women often "appear as main symbolic markers" – "emblems of national identity", of culture, of tradition and progress that saturate the "cultural imaginary" (Fadil 2011: 84; Sullivan 1998: 228). Indeed, even within feminist (specifically liberal) discourse, the woman's body becomes the "site" upon which such values are composed (Sullivan 1998). Veiled and non-veiled Muslim

women are often discursively subject to this divide between modernity/secularism and tradition: while veiled women are perceived as “deniers of, and even complicit with, a history of oppression”, the “secular” not-veiled woman is “revolutionary” (Fadil 2011: 104; Sullivan 1998). This binary reinstates the Western feminist presumption that there is “only one path” for the emancipation of women, and that is the adoption of Western models (Abu-Lughod 1998: 14). Hence, scholars (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) are left wondering what options remain for Muslim women to enter modernity “as neither Western nor traditional”; how can they “remake themselves” as agentic beings, as voices to be reckoned with, within a society that renders them already invalidated, already inaudible (Sullivan 1998: 217)?

## LITERATURE REVIEW II: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF AGENCY

Bound to those same notions that characterize modernity (reliance on reason and rationality, freedom from the tethers of tradition, and rejection of religious subjects as legitimate sources of knowledge) is the troublesome concept of agency. The prevailing theoretical framework for conceptualizing agency – the “subordination and resistance” schema – reinscribes the aforementioned modernist and exclusionary necessities that limit (or potentially completely invalidate) its applicability to experiences that fall outside of the white, Western, and secular. Historically, Western feminist scholarship has the tendency to “valorize” select forms of agency, specifically those considered to subvert “hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality” – a flawed ideology that, according to Saba Mahmood, neglects to address and is unable to engage with “other modalities of agency” (Mahmood 2005: 153). Such an exclusionary understanding of agency “arrogantly” assumes that the West’s self-defined modern, secular, “progressive” path to liberation is the only path, exhausting any other possibility of what it means to live “meaningfully and richly” in the world (Abu-Lughod 1998: 14; Hawthorne 2013: 179).

When applied to religious agency, this schema is a theoretical dead end, as one’s “desire to submit to God” is often dismissed as a mere submission to, and complicity with, hegemonic social norms and oppressive institutional systems (Bilge 2010: 21). Within a strict framework that considers “agency” a mere synonym for “resistance”, how can the desires, actions, and voices of pious individuals be counted as legitimate rather than discarded as false consciousness (Mahmood 2005: 157)? In the face of such limiting theoretical strategies, both Mahmood and Sirma Bilge recognize that at the core of this sociological dilemma is the question of the complex relationship between “the subject and the norm” – the individual and the system (Mahmood

2005; Bilge 2010). Mahmood argues, in order for theorists to “envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary” – particularly those religious forms – they must think of religious agency as a “modality of action” (Mahmood 2002: 155, 157). Similarly, in defending their argument for a more “intersectional” approach to conceptualizing religious agency, Bilge references Judith Butler, who conceives individuals as being external to structures, negotiating its constructions and constraints, “even when those constructions are the very predicates of [the subject’s] own identity” (Bilge 2010: 13). Additionally, Connell argues that to understand agency, theorists must not only understand the subject’s “materiality as objects” – produced to an extent by the systems external to them – “but also their productive power” that is enacted *within* those systems (Connell 2011: 1371).

The conceptualization of agency as “the free exercise of self-willed behavior” is intrinsically linked to the Enlightenment-born, “transcendental”, rational subject (Bilge 2010: 12). Such an understanding of agency is, of course, inextricable from a specific, ableist understanding of subjectivity, and hence, begs “questions of inclusion”: namely, who and what constitutes a “deserving citizen” (Bilge 2010: 10)? The binaries that mark the entrance to modernity and the abjection of religious practice are visible in the experiences and perceptions of Muslim women – veiled or not – by secular Western societies. While veiling is perceived to signify a lack of agency, an invasion of the natural body, an interruption of bodily autonomy, and indicative of the absence of critical thought or intellectual ability, “not-veiling” – to use Nadia Fadil’s term – “figures as an effortless adaptation to prevailing liberal and secular values” (Fadil 2011: 89). In her insightful essay “Not-/unveiling as an ethical practice”, Fadil argues that sociological and feminist scholarship must abandon the idea that the not-veiled body is the *neutral* body, and thus aligned with modern secular standards – uninterrupted, autonomous, and “free” (2011). Not only

does this normative analysis of not-veiling simply reinforce the binaries between secularism/modernity and religion, but it also fails to explore the “various motivations behind the non-veil”, and renders not-veiling an *in-action* of sorts, a reversion to the default secular body (Fadil 2011). Such an understanding of the not-veiled-body-as-neutral results from an ableist reading of the veiled body as indicative of that individual’s compromised intellectual ability and deficient autonomy.

Similarly problematic is the assumed correspondence between “agency” and political resistance or rebellion. As Bilge points out: religious agency should not be thought of as “driven by a desire to resist social pressure, but by a desire to submit to God” (Bilge 2010: 21). To Bilge, the distinction is crucial to conceptualizing an agency that is inclusive of those “formerly non-agentic non-subjects” (2010: 18). Bilge’s essay, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to The Agency of Veiled Muslim Women” explores the propensity for sociological and feminist analyses of Muslim women’s veiling practices to depend on an *intellectualization* of the explanations provided by Muslim women in regards to why they choose to not/veil (2010). According to Bilge, a number of sociologists assert that the “real” motivations behind veiling are *extra*-religious, political in nature, and sometimes rebellious – despite women who veil reporting otherwise. For example, Shadi Hamid characterizes veiling “as a paradoxical act of self-affirmation, political protest, and rebellion” (Hamid 2006: 84). Not only does his analysis completely neglect to address religious motivation, invalidating its significance and potential as a sufficient explanation, but it also relies heavily on the understanding of agency-as-resistance. Indeed, Hamid struggles to come to terms with Muslim women’s desires to simultaneously “assert themselves as women” while staying “true” to their “cultural and religious identity”; Hamid describes this as a paradox, an example of “contradictory

consciousness” (2006: 86). To Hamid and others, the choice to “submit oneself” is questionable – perhaps because, within the normative framework of agency upon which Hamid builds his argument, “certain choices cannot be qualified as choices” (Bilge 2010: 14).

Hence, Bilge argues for what she calls an “intersectional” approach to agency that is able to “seriously engage” with religious motivation without intellectualizing the experiences of Muslim women or catering to the dominant Western secular/liberal framework of subordination and resistance (Bilge 2010). While most contemporary feminists acknowledge the variety of ways that oppression is actualized, enacted, and experienced via the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender, the same “intersectional” analytical strategy is not often afforded to conceptualizations of religious agency. Indeed, the “subordination” versus “resistance” framework derives from that “white” feminist ideology which assumes a commonality between individuals based on gender, and thus assumes a consensus on the meanings of “freedom” and “agency”. This fails to address how intersections of race, class, culture, and religion shape the individual and thus produces different desires, aspirations, experiences and, importantly, different understandings of what it means to be “liberated”. For Bilge, a non-intersectional approach leads to misled assumptions about the desires of individuals in relation to liberation (In the face of Western white women crusading to “save” Muslim women, Abu-Lughod wonders, “can we only free [Muslim] women to be like us” (2002: 786)?). Bilge argues that Western (white) feminist prioritizing of the gender system as the primary source of oppression or identity “conceals forms of oppression operating . . . via other social divisions such as nation, class and race”, and therefore obscures the variety of ways individuals might conceive of agency and liberation (Bilge 2010: 18).

Bilge asserts that any analysis that does not necessitate a constant consideration of the historically situated differences underlying an individual's motivations or desires cannot claim to be an accurate lens through which to think about the experiences and desires of culturally enmired others (Bilge 2010). Hawthorne and Abu-Lughod similarly remind feminist scholars that an inclusive conceptualization of freedom and agency must rest on the acceptance of the “fundamental premise that humans are social beings,” situated in particular historical contexts, immersed in certain communities, and thus have situationally-shaped desires (Abu-Lughod 2002: 786; Hawthorne 2013: 180). Hence, Bilge argues that an intersectional approach to agency – a critical engagement with the ways in which the effects of oppressive forces are fragmented by race, class, nation, and culture in addition to gender – allows for “new ways of conceiving agency within previously ‘irrational’ acts” such as submission to the divine (Bilge 2010: 23). For Bilge and others, the intersectional approach allows scholars to engage with “subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics” (Bilge 2010; Hawthorne 2013: 180).

To consider differences amongst human life is not to instate an insurmountable distance “between cultures”, nor is it to reconstitute old notions of cultural relativism. Bilge, Hawthorne, Mahmood, and Abu-Lughod similarly argue that a consideration of those differences would absolutely necessitate an exploration of the ways those differences arise from the long history of social interaction (Bilge 2010; Hawthorne 2013; Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2002). Abu-Lughod provides a useful analogy in respect to the discussion of the necessity of Intersectionality. She cautions: “we must consider [how ‘cultural others’] might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language” (2002: 788). This “different language” – the motivations that drive individuals to lead certain lives – is potentially illegible when read through



“Western” frameworks. However, because of our participation in the emergence of the current social conditions, it is our responsibility to, in Abu-Lughod’s words, carefully contribute to the creation of a world “where there is the peace necessary for discussions, debates and transformations to occur within communities” (2002: 789). This undoubtedly requires a critical and thoughtful (Bilge might say “intersectional”) look at ourselves, and our historical relationship to “cultural others” – most importantly, how we perceive them, exclude them, and potentially disable them (and further, what damage this causes).

Such a project is of profound importance to the discussion of agency. Take, for instance, the aforementioned understanding of agency as “the free exercise of self-willed behavior”, which always already excludes religious motivation. Mahmood suggests that because “simply religious” (to borrow Bilge’s term) motivation is not necessarily self-willed, but willed by a higher power or power external to the self, an understanding of agency that centralizes “self-willed” behavior leaves no room for religious belief (Mahmood 2009; Bilge 2010). Saba Mahmood addresses the inability of white, western, secular feminist’s conceptualization of agency and liberation to account for that of Muslim women in her essay, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” (Mahmood in Asad 2009).

Mahmood focuses on the 2005 Danish cartoon episode (in which secular cartoonists published an image of the Prophet Muhammad) and explores the “bafflement” non-Muslim liberals expressed in response to the “scope and depth” of Muslim outcry (2009). Mahmood contextualizes liberal confusion as a legacy of Protestant Christian missionary history. She writes,

“Missionaries [experienced shock] when they first encountered non-Christian natives who attributed divine agency to material signs, often regard[ing] material objects . . . as an ontological

extension of themselves (thereby dissolving the distinction between persons and things)” (2009: 72).

Mahmood embeds the current cartoon controversies and liberal confusion in this history. She argues that secular liberals, like the protestant missionaries, insist “religious symbols and icons are one thing, and sacred figures . . . another” – a framework that is inapt for the Muslim experience, and is immediately unable to account for their reactions to cartoon “controversies”. Mahmood writes, secular western liberals read Muslims’ “agitation” towards cartoon depictions of the Prophet as indicative of “a fundamental confusion” about materiality, divine power, and the self (2009). Hence, a value-judgment is made upon the intellectual ability of pious Muslims.

A number of Muslims reported feeling “personally attacked” and “wounded” by the imagery in the Danish cartoons – some even decrying its racist connotations (Mahmood 2009: 75). Mahmood explores these assertions as a reconceptualization of the relationship between the “self” and faith. Such a conceptualization of a “religious self” cannot be sufficiently articulated or addressed by the secular framework of agency and selfhood. Indeed, the secular understanding “agency” as synonymous with “self-willed behavior” (in the sense that the “self” is understood as a separate entity from the divine/power) is based on a vastly different – and markedly Western – conceptualization of how the self lives and is constituted in relation to power.

Perhaps the issue is not that religious agency does not fit the secular liberal mold, but rather that the secular liberal mold is not “fit” to be applied outside the white western context. Employing this secular/liberal/Western “frame” – to use Judith Butler’s terminology – is effectively useless in the context of Muslim women as it immediately rejects the potential for any religious person to exercise any semblance of agency (2009; 2009). Butler reminds us, that these “frames through which we apprehend [lives] are politically saturated” – acknowledging the historical context of western feminist theoretical frameworks (2009: 1). Hence, to impose our

theoretical frameworks would be, at best, inaccurate and unreliable for explanatory purposes, and at worst, reproductive of neo-colonialist constructivism.

## THEORETICAL APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION:

In the words of Judith Butler, bodies “tend to indicate a world beyond themselves” (1993: ix). Indeed, bodies often stand as “material” signifiers of the effects of stratifying systems that predicate the many variations of subjectivity, and are integral to routinizing “both the micro and macro orders” of social life (Eiesland 1994: 22). Crucial to any discussion of agency and legitimacy in the “modern” world is this understanding that “discourse is formative” – formative of perceptions of bodies and of those bodies themselves (Butler 1993: 10). Butler’s *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex* details that process of formation within the context of gender and sex, arguing just as gender is “constructed through relations of power”, so is *any* reference to a body (which, Butler posits, can no longer be understood as a blank slate, nor an objective site upon which gender is thought to be imposed) (1993: x). Thus, even our understandings of the body itself are not “pure”. The perceived fixity of sexual difference, the meaning attached to racial variation – things often perceived to be natural, essential and hence, stable – are “materialized” through normative social constraints. According to Butler, the body is unthinkable, inseparable from the effects of power, and is truly “power’s most productive effect” (Butler 1993: 2).

The relevance of Butler’s theories concerning the social construction of the body to questions regarding the devaluation of religious women’s role in global knowledge production, and their perceived invalidity as agents and subjects, lies within the formative power of discourse. Made evident in the preceding literature review, the concepts of modernity, secularism, agency, and the systems and institutions that (re)produce them, are part of the “exclusionary matrix” that dominates the economy of constructing bodies and subjectivities –

especially in regards to religion (Butler 1993: 3). The maintenance of Western notions of rationality and secularism rests on this process of creation and abjection, on the assertion of distance and difference from religion and hence the exclusion of those individuals who fall into the “constitutive outsides”, the domain of the illegible that haunts the secular West “as the spectre of its own impossibility” (Butler 1993: xi). Bodies that fail to meet the normative standards are excluded from the domain of cultural intelligibility and thus barred from being considered subjects of their own experiences, agents, and sources of knowledge. Undeniably, there are clear standards dictating who and what is allowed entrance into the domain of rationality and legitimacy – standards marked by race, gender, and religiosity. Evidently, conceptualizations of the racialized, gendered, pious body contribute to the process by which we come to understand “otherized” subjectivities within the Western secular worldview.

Disability theorists have long been vocal about the ways in which “cultural otherness” is built upon “the raw materials of human variation” (Thomson 1994). Thinkers such as Ellen Samuels, Nancy L. Eiesland, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Marian Corker and Tom Shakespeare – among many others – have, quite extensively, articulated the way in which the system of disability (like the systems of race, gender, and class) contributes to the construction of *all* bodies and all aspects of subjecthood. Thomson argues, for instance, that there are clear “connections between disability . . . [and] the cultural production of race or gender as forms of ostensible corporeal aberrance” (1994). Indeed, those perceived to be “less” than the white, cis-male norm have historically been attributed inferiority: according to a number of disability scholars, “Western thought has historically claimed . . . a correspondence between disability and femininity”, as well as an “association of race with disability” (Erevelles and Minear 2010; Samuels 2002: 65; Thomson 1997). In fact, within contemporary disability studies, some

scholars do argue for the understanding of disability as a conceptual category that is “constitutive of most social differences” (However, I do not intend to present the disability lens as such a grand narrative. Surely, it is not the only, or primary constitutive system;) (Erevelles and Minear 2010; Erevelles 1996). In other words, the system of disability stands alongside the systems of race and gender as productive of *all* bodies; the discourse of disability, deficiency, deviancy and inferiority contributes to the shaping of all aspects of “othered” subjectivities.

The association of femininity to disability is made evident in the construction of the feminine as inherently inferior to the masculine – an assumption based on the perceived “objective”, “natural” sex differences between the categories “man” and “woman”. Consider the Aristotelian assertion, “the female is as it were a deformed male” in the context of the following analysis from Ellen Samuels:

Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both . . . are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common (Samuels 2002: 65)

Samuels illustrates how the differently gendered body – that which diverges from the male referent – discursively intersects with the disabled body as “cultural displays of aberrance” (Thomson 1994) It is perceived deviancy that characterizes gender inequality and the socially imposed inability of the gendered “other” to enjoy the fruits of social life as fully as those normatively gendered bodies is evidence of the “disabling effect” (Bilge 2010). Indeed, the very humanness of the individual can come into question (Butler 1993). Butler argues in her recent work, within the discourse and enactment of war, there are always bodies – and thus, lives – that are “ungrievable” on account of their gender and racial deviancy from the white male norm (2009). Instead of subjects, drivers of their own fates, they are abjected vessels, empty of

meaning other than what has been imposed onto them – discardable objects. This is evidenced in the objectification of the gendered other, that which has historically been a sign of “an embattled self, the uncontrollable other” who is “to be bought and protected” – or simply thrown away (Sullivan 1998: 228)

Similarly, the *super/subordinate* characteristics that have been historically attributed to the essentialized, racialized other have been used to justify their oppression in both the colonial and neo-colonial eras. Whiteness has served as a prerequisite for economic and social prosperity: not only are people of color excluded from actualizing their own potential, but just the presence of those “othered” bodies necessitates disciplinary, isolative, and violent methods of containment or destruction. This is particularly evident in the “association of degeneracy and disease with racial difference” that served as sufficient justification for forced sterilizations of people of color, laws against miscegenation, segregation, and genocide (Erevelles and Minear 2010: 134). In addition to the access to economic and social opportunities that is denied to communities of color, these injustices are all legitimized by the perception of race as an indicator of sufficiency, ability, and conformity, thus implicating people of color as already unable and incapable. Hence, the hierarchization of racial characteristics exemplifies the way in which the systems of disability and race are *mutually* constitutive, predetermining the extent to which people of color can realize their desires.

The understanding of the system of disability as a socially imposed oppression, first proposed by Mike Oliver in 1990 (the “social model”), provides a lens through which we can articulate and analyze the ways that certain bodies are ranked according to a value-judgment of human difference. This notion of disability as a system constitutive of other social stratifications has thus far been only been effectively applied to discussions of race and gender. However, I

intend to illustrate how understanding disability as the social constructed “attribution of corporeal deviance” can be employed as an analytical framework to explore the ways in which religion is thought of as a signifier of insufficient ability, and to address the question of religious agency (Thomson 1997).

In this thesis, I am using “disability” as a lens through which to analyze the disadvantaging and hierarchization of intellectual ability that results from a Western, and arguably neo-imperialist perception/construction of the religious body. I do anticipate some reservations against my use of disability in the discussion of religious agency, particularly because I am not using it to describe “impairment” or illness, or pain, or injury. My response to this is to refer to the constitutive power of the systems of race and gender: no one exists outside of these systems; every body is subject to them, granted in vastly different ways, but nonetheless, no body is spared racialization or gendering. In my opinion, to suggest that disability analyses should be reserved for those with physical impairments or mental disabilities is akin to suggesting critical race analyses should only be employed for discussions about/by people of color, or that the lives of men should be spared from discussions of gender. This, of course, would be a dire mistake, as it would deny the racialization of white individuals and the gendering of men – a denial, in my opinion, that would equate to reinscribing their “default” status as the unquestioned norm. In the same vein, I think limiting the lens of disability to individuals with impairments, illnesses, pain, injuries, and cognitive disabilities, reinscribes the notion of a “physical origin of disability” – reinstating its “undeniable materiality” – thus minimizing the institutionalization of disability as a stratifying system (Goodley 2001).

I do not wish to present the social model as a “totalizing, meta-historical narrative”. My aim in applying it to the question of religious agency is to explore and contribute to the



discussion about its legitimacy as a social theory. Viewing disability as a socially constructed system does not deny the fact that there are vast amounts of physiological differences amongst the human population, some of which make it extremely difficult – sometimes literally painful – for individuals to “thrive” in the world, socially or physically. In my opinion, the social model of disability does not deny their lived experiences. Surely, the “medical” model speaks to a number of individuals, and there have been incredible gains in regards to medicine and technology that empower individuals, enable them to live their lives how they envision their lives should be. I believe the social model to be inclusive of these desires. Indeed, Sara Goering states, one of the founding principles of the social model is that it “highlights the importance of respecting individuals as they are” and, I would add, how they want to be (2010: 54). Indeed, my use of the social model is not to deny individuals of their desires, whatever form they may take, but is only to direct our focus to the prejudicial, societal attitudes that disadvantage those who deviate from the white, androcentric norm.

As illuminated in the preceding literature review, the Enlightenment-era principles of “forward thinking” rationality continue to structure the institutions and discourses of modernity and secularism. Further, the effects of the systematic, disabling of certain bodies is evidently crucial to the stability of “modernity” and “secularism”. Indeed, disability – like the constructions of race and gender – is constructed in relation to a norm: the “abled”, cis male, white body. This norm is unattainable and based on an essentialized, Enlightenment-era fantasy of what a perfect, liberated, modern human should be; one’s relative inability to embody this norm determines one’s rank on the hierarchy of bodies, and one’s legitimacy in the modern, secular world. Both “modernity” and “secularism” are dependent on the assertion of this “autonomous, rational, and interior” subjects – a set of standards that are perceived as in

opposition to religious belief and thus exclusive of pious individuals (Hawthorne 2013).

Hawthorne's characterization of secular modernity as "masculinized" reveals the negative association of femininity with religion, and the implicit disparities that connote piety as a weakness, to be dominated or discarded (2013). Hawthorne elaborates:

‘The creation and valuation of “religion” as a discursive entity . . . was carefully calibrated to a curiously European construction of gendered difference, wherein “religion” and “female” were semantically clustered and devalued under the fraternity of modernity and the colonial fantasy of the civilizing mission’ (2013: 182).

Here, Hawthorne employs gender as an analytical framework to locate the discursive “valuation” of feminized religion in relation to masculinized secularism and modernity.

Just as Hawthorne uses gender as an analytical framework, disability as a category of analysis can similarly be applied: the attribution of deficiency and difference to religion is evident within its “devaluation” and the implicit barring from that “civilized” position reserved for modern, Enlightened, European men. The disabling effect that is imposed upon religion and specific pious subjects is evidenced in Western attitudes towards the Muslim practice of veiling. However, it is important to note, the disabling and devaluation of religiosity equally implicates not-/unveiled Muslim women. My focus on veiling is a response to the peculiar obsession that Western feminists have with the practice; a disproportionate amount of attention is given to the practice of veiling in Western feminist scholarly work and activism (with specific privilege given to analyses that locate veiling as a mechanism of oppression against women). Similarly, prejudicial attitudes can be seen manifest in laws banning the veil in secular countries such as France and Bulgaria, on account of how it is viewed as a physical manifestation of women's subordination under Islam, and is associated with an inherent absence of intellectual capability.

Nadia Fadil's problematizing of the understanding of the non-veiled body exposes the function of disability in Western perceptions of veiling (2011). Indeed, Fadil notes how the action of unveiling or not-veiling is often perceived to be a "product of integration", an assimilation to the rules of secular governmentality, and importantly, a reversion to the *natural* body. Fadil argues that scholars must "denaturalize a perspective of the body that views not-veiling as a 'natural' state of being", signifying the adoption of European secular values, "whereas veiling indicates a disruption" (2011: 88). In the eyes of the Western, secular liberal, veiling is immediately read as a change to the Muslim woman's body and thus indicative of a change to her entire morality, ability and knowledge. Veiling is perceived to be the physical embodiment of religious oppression, and is perceived by Western secular liberals as compromising Muslim women's bodily autonomy, as well as representative of external forces constraining her intellectual agency and ability.

This prevailing understanding of veiling "as a violation of one's corporeal autonomy or bodily integrity" calls for a disability analysis (Fadil 2011: 97). The veil is intrinsically linked to an understanding of the Muslim woman's body which has consistently been described in terms of a compromise of "one's bodily integrity and psychological well-being" (Fadil 2011: 105). In such characterizations, both the body and the "psychological" autonomy of the Muslim woman come into question; based on an interpretation of the veil as inherently oppressive, an assumption is made about the Muslim woman's coherence as a whole. Indeed, the veil is a "cultural signifier of otherness" that implies an inability to think critically about one's social standing as well as necessitates an understanding of the wearer as subordinate and unagentic (Bilge 2010). For those who wear the veil, doors are closed: they are delegitimized as credible sources of knowledge, as

active and choosing – after all, according to some, “veiling cannot involve a choice since it signifies renouncing one’s personal autonomy” (Bilge 2010: 17).

To reiterate, my aim in writing this thesis is to address the way in which Western feminist society renders Muslim women as lacking some type of exalted traits deemed standard or necessary for living a liberated, fulfilling life in the “modern” world – a conclusion hastily made as a result of a neo-imperialist/Orientalist readings of Muslim women’s perceived race, gender, and religiosity. My intention is to confront the Western feminist ignorance and denial of Muslim women’s participation in knowledge production and trivialization of their contributions, and bring to our attention the severe dangers and risks of such political practices, and the urgency of working to change them. It is not my intention to make a statement about Muslim women or for their experiences by arguing that Muslim women are subject to the “disabling effect”. Here, “disability” does not signify something that lacks within the individual. Rather, “disability” says more about the exclusivity of the social world external to the individual – all the institutions, attitudes, and systems that exclude them, ignore them, or even violently eradicate them – than it does about the individual themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS:

The question of how to address “cultural others” is not easily answered, and I surely do not claim to offer an answer through this thesis with any sense of finality. However, this question is one that underlies much of the past and present global political climate. For examples, we can look to the Syrian refugee crisis; we can look to American presidential candidates who propose the closing of borders to Muslims, or the policing of “Muslim neighborhoods”; and we can look back on the War on Terror and “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. We – as Americans, as students, feminists or academics – are consistently faced with how to address these problems. Yet, Abu-Lughod cautions, we should not “resign ourselves to being cultural relativists” (2002: 788). Indeed, it is far too late for that. Instead, I am advocating for the respect of differences, and the unlearning of our prejudices – a project that requires the hard work involved in consistent, careful, critical, and thoughtful explorations of ourselves, our histories, and our relationship to one another.

My research indicated that the “rules” by which we decide who is or is not capable of agency are largely shaped by racism, misogyny, and ableism – rendering a great amount of people as always, already incapable of agency on account of how those of us in the West perceive such individuals as essentially lacking in some way. In this thesis, I attempted to explore and question these prejudices through the lens of disability, asking: how does ableism contribute to the shaping of white, secular, Western feminist theories and practice, and how, then, do we fail to support Muslim women inside and outside of our communities by dismissing their agency, and thus silencing their voices.

Our understandings of Islam and Muslims are often tainted by our prejudices. In an effort to distance ourselves from Islam, we have constructed it as a faith of irrationality, violence and

hatred, and perceive Muslims to be innately, inherently, naturally inferior to us. This ableist construction of Muslims – women in particular – as inherently lacking in some physical or mental way, silences their voices, rejects their agency and autonomy, and denies them their humanity. We must consider how ableism permeates our prejudices, theories and practices, and how we are often complicit in the devaluing of certain lives. Instead of trying to “save” Muslim women, we must listen to them. Otherwise, we risk maintaining the long-standing, neo-colonial tradition of white women speaking for – and speaking over – other marginalized peoples.

Note \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> In my use of the term “Western”, I do not intend to imply that the “West” is a monolithic, geographically specific referent. I recognize that there is a plurality of knowledge produced in what is commonly called the “West”. However, drawing from Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s definition of “Western feminism”, my reference to “Western” ideology, praxis, literature, or writers is a reference to that which constructs “others as non-Western and hence, themselves as (implicitly) Western” (Mohanty 2003: 501). In doing so, I wish to draw attention to those discursive “strategies” that are dominating common understandings of the “Muslim other” (Mohanty 2003).

## Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783-790.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila (1998) *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton.
- Asad, Talal, Judith Butler et al. 2009. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley: The Townsend Center for the Humanities.
- Bilge, Sirma. 2010. "Beyond subordination vs. resistance: An intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women." *Journal of intercultural studies* 31:9-28.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex*. Berkeley: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith, Jurgen Habermas et al. 2011. *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2011. "Southern Bodies and Disability: re-thinking concepts." *Third World Quarterly* 32(8): 1369-1381.
- Corker, Mairian and Tom Shakespeare. 2002. *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying disability theory*. New York: Continuum.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. 1997. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Eiesland, Nancy (1994) *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Erevelles, Nirmala and Andrea Minear. 2010. "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality." *Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4(2): 127-145.
- Fadil, Nadia. 2011. "Not-/unveiling as an Ethical Practice." *Feminist Review* 98: 83- 109.
- Goering, Sara. 2010. "Revisiting the Relevance of the Social Model of Disability." *The American Journal of Bioethics* 10(1)
- Goodley, Dan. 2001. "'Learning Difficulties', The Social Model of Disability and Impairment: challenging epistemologies." *Disability & Society* 16(2): 207-231.
- Hamid, Shadi. 2006. "Between Orientalism and Postmodernism: The Changing Nature of Western Feminist Thought Towards the Middle East." *Hawwa* 4(1): 76-92.

- Hawthorne, Sian M. 2013. "Displacements: Religion, Gender, and the Catachrestic Demands of Postcoloniality." *Religion & Gender* 3(2): 168-187.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety: The islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton university Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1856. "Speech at anniversary of the People's Paper." *Marx/Engels Selected Works* 1: 500.
- Mohanty, Chandra T. 2003. "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles." *Signs* 28(2): 499-535.
- Oliver, Mike. 2013. "The Social Model of Disability: thirty years on". *Disability & Society* 28(7): 1024-1026.
- Samuels, Ellen. 2002. "Critical Divides: Judith Butler's Body Theory and the Question of Disability." *NWSA* 14(3): 58-76.
- Sullivan, Zohreh T. 1998. "Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran." *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. 1994. "Redrawing the Boundaries of Feminist Disability Studies."
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. 1997. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1992. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. New York: Penguin.