Behind the Burqa: Understanding the history of a cultural symbol

By PHILLIP PARNELL ’13
Contributing Writer

Women across the world choose to wear the burqa because of what it represents. While governments rarely debate women’s clothing, the burqa’s symbolism makes its display significant. To some, it signifies the religiosity and faith of the wearer, to others it shows a woman coerced into wearing it. Because of its political and religious significance, the burqa has been elevated from a simple piece of clothing to a symbol that is discussed worldwide.

Today, five different countries, Egypt, France, Turkey, Syria, and Belgium have chosen to ban the burqa for a variety of reasons. In France, there are so few wearers of the burqa that their voice is overwhelmed by the public. Women are rarely given political or religious positions of authority in Egypt, ensuring that their beliefs and wants are rarely heard by the Egyptian public.

In order to understand the causes for the ban of the burqa, one must comprehend each country’s history, government structure, and social issues. To fully understand France’s relationship with religious symbols, one must start with the French Révolution.

Applying Winnicott to residential life

By KATE FLANAGAN ’14
Contributing Writer

We are defined by the architecture and geography of our campus. The shape of a building, the curve of a path, the interior of a library—these physical realities are distilled as the essence of the college. At Williams, where students are largely isolated, the experience of residing at the College intimately and intensely impacts students’ states of mind and being.

The psychoanalytic theories of D.W. Winnicott provide insight into residential housing at Williams, from the entry to neighborhood, and establish a foundation for recommending changes to our residential system.

The entry is socially and architecturally constructed to emulate the culturally heteronormative dynamic of the nuclear family model. The entry incest taboo socially encourages first-years to correlate their entry as a “home” with “siblings” and “parents.”

First-year housing is concentrated in two regions, isolating incoming students; the interiority of first-year housing further nuclearizes residential life. First-years are compelled to revert back to the “unintegrated state” of infancy as described by Winnicott, an infantilization marked by the symbolic linking of the individual with the entry. “What’s your entry?” is often the first—and sometimes only—question asked of new students.

The individual is isolated within his or her entry, and all daily activity—such as eating dinner or walking to the gym—is performed within the collective. The entry is inescapable, serving to confine the individual in the name of protection.

Eventually, first-year students resist their primary identification with the entry. The entry system is often described as a phenomenon that the first-year is meant to grow out of, as a shoe that no longer fits by the end of the first year.

Through the first-year’s developing resistance to the entry system, an individual is born out of the collective. The relative healthiness and success of this phenomenon can be found in the overall satisfaction indicated by Williams students when questioned about their entry experience.

In a survey of 56 Williams students of all four class years, 76.8% (43 respondents) answered “Yes” when asked, “As a first-year student, do/did you feel attached/to/invested in your Neighborhood this year?”

The entry system primes students to coalesce individually, to develop specific interests and establish a sense of personal autonomy; the neighborhood system demands that the student return to a quasi-holding environment, replete with supervisory figures (the Baxter Fellows) and pre-packaged community building (in the form of programming determined by the Neighborhood Boards).

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Mecca Sullivan came to Williams as a Bolin Fellow while she was earning her Ph.D at the University of Pennsylvania. As a graduate of Smith, she came to the Purple Valley excited to experience liberal arts from the other side of the classroom. And like many of us, she was blown away by the beauty of the mountains.

How does your hometown compare to Williamstown?

I'm from Harlem, New York. I grew up among the smells of foods derived from West Africa, Jamaica, Santo Domingo, and the American South, the round-the-clock flash of lights, and an ever-present chorus of jazz, hip-hop, merengue and bachata music on the streets.

On one level, all this makes Harlem very different from Williamstown. And yet there are many reasons why this experience helps me feel at home in Williamstown. Harlem has a rich history and a defining sense of community. It's a place with a deeply-rooted identity, which is true of Williamstown as well. I'm honored to be in the company of the many paradigm-shifting scholars and thinkers who have taught here, several of whom are personal idols of mine. That sense of legacy, community and history bring Harlem and Williamstown together for me.

What about Williams has most challenged you or most forced you to grow as an academic and as a person?

Teaching always inspires my scholarship, and pushes my work to grow. In the course I'm teaching now, "Voice and Sexuality in Afrodiasporic Women’s Literature," we've had a number of discussions that have prompted me to think differently about my critical work and my pedagogy. The course brings discourses of gender and sexuality into conversation with Afrodiasporic cultural criticism and poetic theories of voice.

This set of concerns draws a great mix of students, some of whom are more familiar with the literary critical focus, others with the black cultural criticism, and others with the feminist and queer theory.

In your time here, what has surprised you the most about our student population?

I am so impressed by how organized the students are in relation to social issues on campus. The student response to last semester's hate crime incident was thoughtful, efficient, and effective. The way the students mobilized to gain the support of faculty and administrators was truly admirable.

Regarding the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies department, what would you say is its most important contribution to the campus?

WGSS brings together a cross section of students from various departments, and allows them to discuss issues crucial to their lives. Particularly during the college years, people spend a good deal of time considering their relationships to gender and sexuality. WGSS courses allow students to develop a vocabulary for having those conversations, and push them to think about familiar issues in new ways.

WGSS helps them consider, for example, how gender and sexuality are inextricable from issues of race, class, and nation, and how those intersections function in the various communities they belong to.

As a literary scholar, I find it especially gratifying to see students begin to make these connections in their readings of novels, stories, poems and plays.

What should the campus take away from the upcoming Women's History Month?

The women's history month calendar is full of really exciting events, many of which are supported by WGSS and WGSS faculty.

One event I hope many people will attend is the reading by poet Rachel Eliza Griffiths, an internationally-published African American poet whose latest poetry collection, Male & Pear, responds to key issues, themes, and characters in African American literature. Her poem's title, for example, on the Celie's conflicted relationship to pleasure in Alice Walker's The Color Purple, and reflect on the complicated motherhoods we see in Toni Morrison's Sula and Beloved. Anyone who is interested in gender, sexuality, and the legacies of literature will get a lot from her reading. I think this event is a great example of what Women's History Month is about.

It offers an opportunity to think about women's experiences in various cultural and social contexts and across historical moments, and to relate them to our experiences in the present day.

What has been your most enlightening cultural or travel experience outside the purple bubble?

My most formative travel experience of all time was the trip I took to Nigeria with my mother and grandmother when I was in the fifth grade. I was raised in what I now understand as an Afrocentric household, in which my parents emphasized a global, transnational consciousness as central to our family's African-American identity. The trip to Nigeria really expanded my understanding of what it meant to be African American and the complex ways in which national, cultural, and ethnic identities work in the Afrikan Diaspora.

More recently, I had the opportunity to travel to Ghana to participate in the Pan-African Literary Forum, a gathering of writers and scholars from around the world who met in Accra and Kokrobite (a small island outside of Accra) to share writing and discuss contemporary Afro-diasporic literature.

The experience had a tremendous impact on my dissertation, which explores the relationships between voice, genre, and identity in Afrodiasporic women's literature. As I plan toward developing the dissertation into a book-length study, I'm looking forward to continuing my research in other diasporic locations including feminist communities in Barcelona and Madrid. It's wonderful to have a vibrant, inspiring place like Williamstown to return to as I synthesize my research and move forward with the project.

Compiled by Taylor Bundy ’13
Public schools, including Islamic heads that banned overt religious symbols in 2004, when the French en face racial discrimination. To today, immigrants in France to question the value of these scars, Jewish kippas and large crosses. It was caused by the fear that the right wing party was gaining too many votes by blaming France’s social problems on immigrants. Instead of forcing immigrants out of France, French political parties decided to force Muslim girls out of French public schools. The international public saw this law as being aimed at the burqa, but under the guise of secularism in general. A new law passed in 2011 has fully cemented France’s dis-taste with the burqa. This law bans its use in public areas including parks and movie theatres with a maximum fine of 300 euros. It also includes a provision which states that anyone who forces another French citizen to wear the burqa will be sentenced to a 30,000 euro fine and time in prison. While many French people believe that a substantial percentage of burqa wearers are being forced to wear it, it is actually a misperception, as the vast majority do so by choice. Egypt has also decided to ban the veil, though it has done so for completely different reasons. The Egyptian government was concerned about security in Universities, and was influenced by the desire to be perceived as Western. In the 1920s Islamic dress was the norm in Egypt until two prominent women dramatically deviated, sparking a social trend that favored Western dress. By the 1950s the burqa was considered an antiquated piece of clothing that was highly unfashionable. When Gamal Abdel Nasser became the presi-dent of Egypt after the coup in 1952, he steered the country towards Western-ization, support-ing more women wearing Western dress and join-ing the workforce. When Anwar Sadat took over Egypt as president in the 1970s, he invited the Islamic Brotherhood back into the country, and it penned the idea of the Islam-ization of society in Egypt, in which the laws and ideals of the Quran would rule the country. This shift caused women to wear the veil. Before the Arab Spring, the Egyptian government was a religiously moder-date authoritarian regime and President Hosni Mubarak ruled on legal legitimate-ty (he was the vice-president when the old president, Sadat, was assassinated by a radical Islamic group) to cement his sovereignty. He cracked down on rad-i-cal Islamic groups after he took power, but allowed non-violent groups to stay. This further cemented the influence of conservative Islamic ideals within the country. Religious leaders in Egypt have political authority, and Sheikh Tantawi, the head of the Al-Azhar school (one of the oldest Sunni Islamic Universities in the world), professed the fatwa (or ban) of the burqa in fall of 2009, five years after France originally banned the Islamic veil in public schools. Tantawi claimed that the burqa needed to be banned for security reasons, as any student could sit in for another dur-ing an examination while wearing the burqa without being properly identified. The ban immediately went into the Egyptian legal system for debate and in January of 2010 the Egyptian Higher Administrative Court ruled that reli-gious or governmental leaders could not ban the burqa at public schools, but that they would have to be removed before students sat for examinations for identification purposes. While both France and Egypt decided to ban the burqa for distinct reasons, there is some commonality between the two decisions: Both countries have to grapple with the fear of Islamic extrem-isim. France has experienced bombings from Islamic groups since the French-Algerian war and the bombings in Eu- rope that occurred in the last 10 years have encouraged the extant fear Egypt has combated radical Islamic groups since its independence.

The neighborhood system does not allow students to freely assess their residential settings in terms of what they value the most. As a matter of resi-dential life policy, the neighborhood system reflects a conscious effort to prolong the period of infantilization. Furthermore, the success of a neigh-borhood is largely contingent of on the architecture and geography of the neighborhood’s houses. The physical resources of a neighborhood facilitate the promotion of community, and without those resources, community building is difficult, regardless of the enthusiasm of invested individuals. I have known students who system-atically and creatively designed their own residential experience at Wil-liams by migrating from building to building, residing in different corners of our Williams world. We speak in a language of transference in discussing our relationships with space at the Col-lege, for even while we embrace our individualized dorm rooms, we can be found saying, “I’m living in the library this week.” In these words, we acknowledge that phenomenon of the Purple Bubble, an understanding of space and residency as extensive and not limited to our offi-cially designated houses. These houses are, for many, never homes. Perhaps our residential life policies should ac-tively encourage this creative usage of the campus' architecture and geogra-phy, as opposed to stifling such action.
Response
(partially inspired by Miles)
by Tirhaka Love ’15

Renaissance, Renaissance Harlem Renaissance
Was aimed at breaking Consciousness.
They always said that the 1, 2 steps on 1930s
Dance halls could bring down the house.
More like explode the Twin Tower mentalities
Of white hate and its brother Supremacy.

This music rang through wooden floorboards,
Duke Ellington straps his band to his torso.
The Hurricane club is poppin tonight.
Because you know it don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got that swing.
Brass trumpets bleed crescendos.
The dance floor is an internal war procession,
Guns blaring.
The conductor leaping through the ceiling
As if there are trampolines in his shins.

It’s hard to be a racist
When the big band blues blares the
Hate out of a man’s ear
Ella Fitzgerald’s dove voice
Made “Lullaby of Birdland” sound like heaven,
At Last sound like God’s promise fulfilled.
Negroes and Negresses spilled their pain
Through their pens and microphones.
They were literate in the language of defeat,
Fluent in the tongue of tragedy.
These men and women gave birth to Hip Hop’s love affair with brownstone steps,
Turned swing into swag.
Sartorialist like Nat King Cole
Souls filled tailored suits
And made slave ships dissolve into the Atlantic.

Did DuBois’ talented tenth become the top one percent
Of African American potential. I think not.
Because there were only brown faces occupying Harlem.
Because it was Marcus Garvey’s Rastafarian
Beliefs that inspired men to dream.
Alien and Elohim
I and I love to believe.

It was Louis Armstrong’s itchy cotton voice
That told us that the world was wonderful
Even when our eyes were too blackened and blued to see out of them clearly.
Was it Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit”
That made us plant seeds of artistic repair?
And it was Thelonius Monk who reminded us
That the best drinks run smooth with no chaser.
Harlem, you transformed the Apollo Theater
From a lazy building on 125th
Into a beautiful mother
Pregnant with the likes of The Jackson 5
Marvin Gaye, Luther Vandross
And the sultry sounds of artists
Who will remain engraved in the tablets of our hearts.

You introduced us to the stars and the skies
We were so happy to meet.
You introduced us to the stars and the skies
And I won’t let Booker T. Washington tell me that we needed the White man to run
Our streets.

But times will get better. When every child has an iPad
The dance floor is an internal war procession,
We all want to be technologies whipping boy, sign me up, oh please! Times will get better.

Times will get better. Technology will rape our bodies
till we scream in joy, till we desire nothing but to destroy.
Times will get better.

So I ask again, Will times get better? Slaves to phones, computers, and artificial light, we like to be dominated,

Times will get better.

But times will get better. When every child has an iPad
We were so happy to meet.

Times will get better. When every child has an iPad
Don’t ever let them tell you
To determine what you practice.

Will times get better? The world has two eyes and is crying a sea of tears.
And all we have is a bunch iPads to dry the blood of broken years. Times will not get better.

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