Diasporas and dystopias on the beach
Burkini wars in France and Australia

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Introduction

Islamophobia is internationalised. The othering depictions, practices and policies of anti-Muslim racism are shared and recycled throughout the global ‘West’, yet even as an ideology of empire they must take root on national soil. The inflections of national culture and history produces some distinctive contrasts and ironies in the way Islamophobia is manifested in different nations; this chapter explores some of these by contrasting the burkini (also spelled ‘burqini’) as a story of redemption and reconciliation in Australia after the 2007 Cronulla riots with that of the ‘burkini wars’ on French beaches during 2016–2017. The burkini itself is an Australian-designed ‘modest’ swimming costume originated in 2004 by Lebanon-born fashion designer Aheda Zanetti to enable Muslim women to enjoy the Australian seaside in comfort and style. The bikini, of course, was originally a French design, emerging in the early post-war period. It achieved fame almost simultaneously with the then-young French actress Brigitte Bardot, who starred in Manina: The Girl in the Bikini in 1953.

So famous, in fact, that Front National leader Marine Le Pen during the beachside battles over the burkini in 2016, held up Bardot, her bikini and her erstwhile director-husband Roger Vadim, as icons of true France: ‘The French beaches are those of Bardot and Vadim’ (cited in Fuggle 2016). In the early 1960s, ironically, Australia had its own ‘bikini wars’, so called, when bans against women wearing too little clothing in the beach were notoriously enforced, after official interventions on Sydney’s ‘iconic’ Bondi waterfront in 1945, and against a Hollywood actress and a ‘local beauty’ alike in the 1950s (Waverley Library 2009; Drewe 2015, p. 117). Sophie Fuggle (2016) comments thus on Le Pen’s ethnocentric iconography:

By invoking French nostalgia for the famous duo and the era they represented – and then linking the burkini to the recent attacks in Nice and Normandy – Le Pen isn’t just harking back to a mythical time before covered-up Muslim women ruined the eroticism of the deserted French coastline; she is also playing on deep-rooted national anxieties by offering
a reminder that the French beach hasn’t always been a place of rest and relaxation. It has also been the site of violence, trauma, and invasion.

Fuggle (2016) observes, ‘The beach has long been a powerful symbol in France and a repository of French national identity.’ Legion indeed are the commentators who have remarked the very same about Australia.¹ Not least was this observation repeated at the time of Sydney’s 2005 Cronulla riots, when the racist vigilante mob, fired with Islamophobia, vowed to ‘fight them on the beaches’ (Hussein and Poynting 2017).

Fuggle clearly has a point about the prior meaning of the beach in French national culture. Just Google ‘France’, ‘iconic’, ‘photo’ and ‘beach’ in any permutation, and up will come pictures of Normandy and D-Day. Google ‘Australia’, ‘iconic’, ‘photo’ and ‘beach’, and you will inevitably be presented with Max Dupain’s iconic and beautiful photograph of ‘The Sunbaker’ (1937), on Culburra Beach.²

There is another beach photograph by that great Australian photographer, whimsical but scarcely less beautiful: ‘Nuns at Newport Beach 1960’.³ In this, another black and white classic, three nuns clothed head to toe in veils and habits, walk along the windswept sand of Sydney’s northern peninsula. Indeed, in all their ‘clobber’. Virtually contemporaneous with Sydney’s ‘bikini wars’, it is hard to know whether Dupain is being mischievous, but it is more likely a gentle and egalitarian observation about the Australian beach being for everyone. According to the dominant narrative of the Cronulla riot in 2005 – and, as Hussein and Poynting (2017) point out, it was an Islamophobic narrative:

the locals of Sutherland Shire, an exceptionally white, Anglo area in culturally diverse Sydney, had for years been ‘putting up with’ immigrant outsiders from the working-class western suburbs who, in addition to affronting ‘our women’, were exclusively responsible for littering the parks and beaches; uniquely involved in boisterousness and skylarking; played football on the sand; and dressed inappropriately for the beach by wearing too many clothes.

(Poynting 2006)

Cronulla beach, in the year of the London transport bombings and a couple of years after the Bali ones, was manifestly not for everyone. One of the provocations of the Cronulla riot had been a fight between a group of local, young, white, male surf-lifesavers and a group of Muslim Lebanese-background young men from the inland suburbs. The former had asserted that the beach belonged to them, since ‘Lebs can’t swim’. As we shall see below, in the backwash of Cronulla, attempts at intercultural bridge-building recruited photogenic young Lebanese-background women as volunteer lifesavers at Cronulla (lifesaving clubs, like the beach, having been an Australian icon for generations), sporting the recently designed burkini in the traditional lifesaving colours.

The burkini thus came to (global) fame as an assertion of beachside belonging, a gesture of inclusion, of participation in traditional (dominant) Australian culture: a place in the national photograph. In short, it functioned as an instrument of integration in two directions, entering into the self-defined Australian ‘mainstream’, and being drawn into that mainstream. It is indeed ironic that it came to signify the opposite in France, and in the ‘burkini war’ battles that were to be fought in Australia.
The 2007 ‘Heart of the Nation’ advertisement for the national Murdoch broadsheet, *The Australian*, opens with a group of young people dressed in the distinctive yellow and red attire of Surf Lifesaving Australia sitting on a beach gazing out to sea as the sun sets into the ocean. As they rise to their feet, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the fact that one of the young lifeguards is wearing a full-body swimsuit – a garment which viewers would soon learn to call a burkini.

The young lifesaver featured in the advertisement was Mecca Laa Laa, a participant in the ‘On the same wave’ program launched in the wake of the 2007 Cronulla riots by Surf Lifesaving Australia in partnership with Sutherland Shire Council and the Federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship to encourage young people, particularly those of ‘Middle Eastern background’, to participate in Surf Lifesaving (Fitzgerald and Giles n.d.). The story of reconciliation and healing as symbolised by the ‘On the same wave’ program and Mecca Laa Laa in particular received national and international media coverage. For Australians who had been left shaken by the riots, the image of Mecca Laa Laa in her Surf Lifesaving burkini provided a welcome reassurance that their country’s commitment to multicultural inclusion had been reasserted. Though the burkini was an obvious target for racist derision and abuse, Susie Khamis’s assessment that it ‘makes the Australian beach a far more inclusive, accommodating space’ was a widely shared sentiment (Khamis 2010, p. 387).

Yet eleven years after *The Australian* had featured Mecca Laa Laa in its ‘Heart of the Nation’ campaign, the newspaper turned its spotlight on her again. This time, however, it did not present her as a positive symbol of Australian nationhood. Rather, it was outraged that the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) had provided sponsorship for the ‘Faith, Fashion, Fusion: Muslim Women’s Style in Australia’ exhibition (in which Laa Laa was a prominent feature) from Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum to hold showings in Malaysia and Indonesia. Australian newspapers published articles and editorials on this topic, with *The Australian*’s (2018) editorial proclaiming that DFAT was ‘spending taxpayers’ money pretending that Islamic dress is part of our cultural identity. It is not and never has been.’

*The Australian*’s about-face regarding Mecca Laa Laa and the burkini is in part an Antipodean echo of events in France, where following the truck murder of 86 people during Bastille Day celebrations in nearby Nice in July 2016, the mayor of Cannes banned ‘burkini’ full-cover swimming costumes from Cannes beaches as ‘a symbol of Islamic extremism’. Over thirty French mayors then did likewise, with the edicts causing international consternation after reports and photographs were published showing four armed police forcing a burkini-clad Muslim woman to remove clothing on the beach at Nice. Shortly afterwards, the French Council of State (Conseil d’Etat) overturned the edict by the town of Villeneuve-Loubet on the grounds that it ‘seriously and clearly illegally breached fundamental freedoms’. The other bans were also overturned over the following few weeks. However, the topic of burkini bans was revived in June 2017 when the Mayor of Lorette in central France banned the burkini from a newly opened swimming area in June 2017 and then again in December 2017 in neighbouring Switzerland when city councillors in Geneva voted in favour of rules forcing women using the city’s swimming pools to wear bathers that revealed the arms and did not extend below the knee (Agerholm 2017).

The story of the burkini in Australia and in France illustrates the way in which Islamophobic moral panics, like fashion, have the capacity to be transmitted across borders—an under-researched area in comparison to the vast amount of scholarship and political commentary that has been devoted to the global transmission of Islamist ideology. Islamophobic policies, publications and
attacks in one location may variously serve to trigger, reinforce, or justify local Islamophobia. For those with a more liberal mindset, events like the attempt to ban the burkini in France are regarded as a warning about possible future developments in their own societies but may also serve as a reassurance that ‘their’ Islamophobia is worse than ‘our’ Islamophobia. However, *The Australian*’s shift from celebrating to demonising the burkini also illustrates the dual roles that have been established for Muslim fashion in post 9/11 Muslim-minority societies like Australia: on the one hand, such women are mobilised as a resource for community harmony and international commerce, on the other hand, they also provide a convenient target for scapegoating.

**Background: anti-Muslim racism**

Internationally, conservative and far-right commentators have established a genre of dystopian literature forecasting a new Dark Age in which Europe is reduced to a state of servitude by Muslim immigrants from its former colonies. Hardline anti-Muslim writers including Bat Ye’or, Oriana Fallaci, Melanie Phillips and Ayaan Hirsi Ali have contributed to this ‘Eurabia’ discourse, while softer versions locating Muslims as an unruly population in need of discipline have become firmly established in centrist policy-making. In Australia, Europe has come to serve as a reference point for politicians and commentators seeking to address ‘the Muslim problem’ in terms of the need to avoid excessive multicultural accommodation. The origins of Europe’s ‘Muslim problem’ are assumed to lie within Muslims themselves and Europe’s failure to assert its own cultural supremacy rather than in the legacies of colonialism, migration and settlement.

During and after the bloody Algerian War of Independence of 1954–1962, Algerians and other North Africans (Maghrebins) migrated to France where they were segregated to low-cost housing estates, popularised as quartiers de désespoir, ‘suburbs of despair’. As French citizens born and educated in France, many second and third generation French Muslims regard themselves as entitled to the same social, political, religious rights as other citizens (Arslan 2015). Since the failure of the anti-racist campaigns to achieve equality between Muslim immigrants and members of the receiving society, Islam in France has increasingly become an identity shelter for members of younger generations who are less familiar with the categorised ‘ethnic’ countries of their parents or grandparents and their associated language (ibid.). Within this context of social exclusion, Muslim women are among the most socio-economically marginalised in France (ibid.).

Australian commentators have referenced European, especially French, regulation of Muslim women’s clothing since the 2004 prohibition on wearing religious symbols in French state schools. For example, Cory Bernardi, who served as a government Senator for the Liberal party from 2007 until breaking away to form the Australian Conservative party in 2017, wrote on his personal website that ‘If we don’t want to go down the same path as France – a situation I warned my colleagues of many years ago (only to be met with media and parliamentary derision) – we need to take immediate action’ – including reconsidering support for the UNHCR and banning the burqa (Bernardi 2017). For liberal Australians, on the other hand, the European dystopia is the rise of the far right and the decline of tolerance. This serves as a warning but also as a reassuring counterpoint against which Australian racism seems comparatively benign. Muslims living in Australia fear that measures such as the hijab ban in French schools might eventually find a place in Australia.

**Clothing regulation and fearmongering**

Contemporary regulation of religious clothing by the French authorities echoes the de-veiling campaigns in colonial Algeria, where in an aim to ‘civilise’ the Algerians, the French colonisers
sought to forcibly ‘free’ colonised women from their veils. For immigrants from the former colonies laïcité then shifted from its established role as an instrument to restrain the power of the Catholic church to a weapon with which to control the problem population of Maghrebi immigrants. The concept has been used to justify the ban on wearing visible religious symbols since the 1989 incident known as l’affaire du foulard (the headscarf affair) in which three schoolgirls were expelled from their lycée (middle school) after they refused to remove their headscarves when instructed to do so (Bloul 1994). Like the burkini debacle of 2016, the 1989 debates were initiated and dominated by men, with very limited female participation (ibid.). The debate recurred periodically: in 1994 another headscarf-wearing incident; in 2003 when the Stasi commission into laïcité recommended that religious symbols be banned from schools; in 2004 the recommendation became law. The face veil became a hot topic in Sarkozy’s presidency where the former French President, speaking to both houses of parliament in 2009, stated that the burqa is not only ‘symbol of subjugation’ that ‘is not welcome in the territory of the republic’ but also ‘not a religious symbol’ (Le Point 2009) while at the same time saying that the issue of the burqa is not religious but an issue of female disempowerment and the solution was the doctrine of laïcité. He then appointed a commission into face veils, known as the Gérin report (Selby 2011, p. 385), which included some 221 testimonies, none of which were from women who wore face-veils or the burqa (ibid., p. 387). This report was the precursor and an added justifier (on top of security reasons) of the 2010 anti-face covering law. Not only must Muslim women have their dress codes dictated by the state in schools, but now in public spaces more generally. So, the burkini ban on the beach comes within a trajectory of politicians using religious dress to justify discriminatory laws in the name of liberation, and attract media attention along the way.

Contrary to its original inclusionary intention of bridging a divided France through laïcité and l’école laïque, the anti-headscarf law emerging in an Islamophobic post-9/11 context, is exclusionary (Atkan 2009) which at its worst prevents Muslim girls and young women from accessing education. Furthermore, it paved the way for the anti-face coverings (in public spaces) law of 2010, which was directed at the face-veil, though by this stage this was passed in the name of security. The previous debates around laïcité just enhanced the securitised turn. The securitised discourse surrounded the recent history of bombings on French soil, starting in the 1970s, were linked in a general way to ‘Arabs’ inspired by ‘Middle Eastern’ issues rather than North African ones. The combination of securitising discourse and Islam has only been enhanced by the post 9/11 global surge in Islamophobia.

As French politicians continued to argue that gender oppression is exemplified by the visible and easily tangible element of the veil, the aforementioned Stasi commission detailed ‘the Islamic veil is a sign of the alienation of women’ (Gökarıksel and Mitchell 2005, p. 156). To debate the accommodation of Islam is, then, a strong case of symbolic politics, a convenient means of distracting attention from more serious problems, such as unwelcome economic cuts (Silvestri 2010), or a kind of replacement issue (Terray 2004) which relates to the idea of values being threatened that must supposedly be defended against an internal enemy. As Brown points out, the concept of secularism undergirding the promulgation of tolerance within multicultural liberal democracies not only legitimates their intolerance, but also glosses over the ways in which certain cultures and religions are marked in advance as ineligible for tolerance, while others are so hegemonic as not even to register as cultures or religions (Brown 2008). The second element is related to the fact that attempts to ban the full veil can be viewed in the context of a trend towards the culturalisation of citizenship (Moors 2012).

Like the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada (with the exception of Quebec), Australia has not attempted to regulate Muslim women’s dress in public space. (Courts in Western Australia and New South Wales have ordered women to remove their face-veils when...
giving evidence). However, while legislative measures have not been imposed, Muslim women in Australia find themselves disciplined into conformity with hegemonic norms by routine incidents of discrimination and harassment, fueled by high-profile public scare-mongering. Right-wing politicians such as Jacquie Lambie and Pauline Hanson have called Australia to follow France’s lead by regulating and/or prohibiting certain forms of Muslim dress. Eventually in 2014, after a campaign led by Cory Bernardi, the Speaker Bronwyn Bishop attempted farcically to ban or segregate visitors wearing face-coverings from the public gallery of parliament. Anti-hijab rhetoric from such politicians validated the abuse and harassment of visibly Muslim women by those seeking to ‘liberate’ them. Women often perceived these fearful events as a stage in a process that would lead to French-style bans of hijab in public spaces.

Islamophobia in Australia has not passed without notice in France. In 2014, the centre-left newspaper *Libération* published a report headlined ‘L’islamophobie se porte bien en Australie’ (‘Islamophobia is doing well in Australia’). The report discussed events such as the short-lived ban on burqas in Parliament as well as the spike in assaults upon visibly Muslim women and the founding of an anti-Muslim political party, concluding that ‘[t]he country is in the grip of strong tensions’ (Cheffouf 2014). In 2017, a *Le Monde* report headlined ‘Marine Le Pen has an emulator in Australia’ described Hanson as being ‘as red(haired) as Marine Le Pen is blonde’, further amplifying that the One Nation leader ‘of the far-right party . . . embodies the Australian version of this rise of populism observed in so many Western democracies’ (*Le Monde* 2017). Hanson’s burqa-clad appearance in Parliament a few months later was described by the daily newspaper *20 Minutes* as being in ‘mauvais gout’ (bad taste), while Hanson was described by *Libération* as a ‘fervent anti-burqa activist’ and by *Yahoo French News* as the ‘local Marine Le Pen’ in Australia (Yahoo 2017; see also *Le Monde* 2017). Similarly, reports in Australia of Hanson being compared to Le Pen are not uncommon (see, for example, *Age* 2017).

**Modest fashion, social inclusion and antiracism**

As Reina Lewis observes, ‘it feels as if modest dressing is all over media, but on the news pages, not the fashion pages’ (Lewis 2015, p. 2597). The most prominent element of this coverage is fear-mongering commentaries in which (Muslim) modest fashion is described as a threat to established gender norms and social order. However, ‘modest fashion’ has also become a key site for the rearticulation of positive female Muslim identity within mainstream media discourse in Australia, where Muslim communities have responded to Islamophobic attitudes towards the hijab by hosting fashion shows (often supported by state or federal funding). For example in 2002, several local media published articles on a youth-led fashion parade in a Melbourne suburb held to ‘dispel myths about Islam’:

> A fashion parade is not normally about much more than what’s on the surface. But a parade to be held in Moreland on Wednesday aims to avoid the usual trap of first impressions and go behind the image. Meadow Heights student Alanur Aydemir, 21, will wear a favourite skirt and top with a baby blue hajib [sic] (head scarf) at the all-women event in Brunswick. *(Moreland Sentinel 2002)*

The travelling fashion event ‘My Dress, My Image, My Choice’ toured various Australian locations from 2005 to 2012 and paraded ‘Muslim fashions’ for a non-Muslim audience. The initiative, partly funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, was developed in response to post 9/11 ‘acts of intolerance’ towards Muslim women in Australia.
Reporting on ‘My Dress, My Image, My Choice’ increased after the unveiling of the ‘burkini’ in November 2006. The notion of fashion as a cultural bridge was equally noticed by, and disseminated in, the media from the beginning (via ‘My Dress, My Image, My Choice’) in Melbourne in 2005 until the event was ‘taken over’ by The Powerhouse Museum’s Faith, Fashion, Fusion in 2012. Often reported on in attempts by Muslim women to ‘lift the mysticism surrounding veils and headscarves’, the event was seen as a tool to use fashion as a bridge to mainstream Australia.

Even though the notion of ‘modest fashion’ was discussed in these early reports it was not used to describe a specific social and cultural movement, but still within the framework of ‘Islam’ and ‘us’. For example, in 2008 the term appeared in the headline ‘Islam makes modest inroad in fashion’ published on 26 November 2008 in The Age. ‘Modest fashion’ was a term used to describe the same exoticised ‘Other’ of previous incarnations of mainstream media discourse about Muslim women. Only with the figure of the ‘hip hijabi’ did representations of Muslim women shift to a new discursive register. The burkini entered the market at a time when Muslim women were facing increasing hostility for the visible difference they displayed in their clothes – difference all too often interpreted as a sign of backwardness, lack of integration, foreignness and extremism (Tarlo 2016; Minganti 2013).

As noted in related in numerous media profiles, Lebanese-born Australian designer Aheda Zanetti was prompted to make her initial foray into Islamic sportswear in order to produce suitable sports attire for her niece, who was encumbered by the long-sleeved skivvy, tracksuit pants and headscarf that was the only available modest option for her to wear while playing netball. After positive local response to her ‘hijood’, Zanetti’s next venture was to design a high-quality modest swimsuit and market it under a catchy brand name – the burkini – a portmanteau combination of ‘bikini’ and ‘burqa’. Muslim women participating in swimming had been subjected to a scare campaign generated by high-profile talkback radio host Alan Jones in 2001 after he discovered that Auburn Swimming Pool (a council-run facility in a suburb of Sydney with a large Muslim population) had been holding women-only sessions for one hour a day for ten days during midwinter in order to allow female students from Nour al Houda Islamic College to have swimming lessons. Jones found this news to be incongruous to the point of bizarre, describing a scene in which ‘they go there and dive in in all their clobber’ (ABC 2002). As the ABC’s Mediawatch television show noted in a segment titled ‘Drowning in Hate’, ‘the girls from Nour Al Houda Islamic College wore swimmers, not “clobber”’ during their swimming lessons, but the indent highlighted both the desire for Muslim women and girls to participate in swimming and the need for appropriate attire. Zanetti’s goal in designing and marketing the burkini was to build Muslim women’s confidence through clothing, and encourage wider participation in sports – in this case by producing comfortable, attractive, practical, covered swimwear using appropriate lightweight, flexible, UV-protected, chlorine-resistant fabrics. Zanetti was (and remains) an articulate media spokesperson for her product and the ethos that it represents.

Although Zanetti’s company has trademarked the name (under both spellings) and her website states that ‘the brand must not be used in connection with another manufacturer’s products’, it has entered the global vocabulary as a generic term for modest swimwear. Zanetti’s chosen brand name may have significantly enhanced her product’s success, but also contributed to the level of angst directed towards it. Although the garment itself does not resemble a burqa (in the form of either the Afghan-style shuttlecock burqa which attracted headlines as a symbol of Taliban oppression or the niqab-style face-veil as used in French discourse), the name itself is taken as a signifier of extremism rather than as light-hearted word-play. Despite the significant amount of positive media coverage given to the burkini and its creator, the topic of Muslim women and swimming has continued to be subjected to
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scaremongering in Australia. Maree Pardy describes Muslim women as having been assigned ‘the curious symbolic role of cultural creep’ during a 2010 incident when the Victorian Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal (VCAT) granted an exemption from the Equal Opportunity Act in order to allow an outer Melbourne suburban council to host a Ramadan celebration at the local swimming pool at which all participants over the age of ten would be required to wear clothing that concealed their bodies as far as the knees and elbows (Pardy 2016). A similar furore ensued in 2017 when Cumberland council in western Sydney installed privacy curtains at one of the five pools in its aquatic centre during its twice-weekly women’s only swim sessions, which contrary to media reports were not exclusive to Muslim women (Winsor 2017).

As well as their established role in multicultural governance, the burkini and modest fashion in general are increasingly cited as valuable commodities in terms of international trade and commerce. The much-derided DFAT announcement of the launch of the ‘Faith, Fusion, Fashion’ exhibition in Malaysia cited ‘the obvious economic benefits’ of the event, given that the modest fashion market was forecast to reach US$368 billion by 2025 (Cue 2018). The economic rationale drew support from some figures on the right, with the newsletter of the libertarian Centre for Independent Studies think-tank publishing an article by Peter Kurti, which stated:

> When an Aussie fashion designer shows Muslim women how they can be both contemporary and modest, we should embrace it as part of our open multicultural society – and promote it. After all, the DFAT exhibition was destined for Kuala Lumpur and not Klosters. Muslim women in Malaysia are going to buy their clothes from somewhere: why not encourage it to be from Australia? (Kurti 2018)

And DFAT’s decision to promote Australian modest fashion in South East Asia is a routine market undertaking, given that as Shirazi (2016, p. 185) notes, the market for modest swimwear has been saturated by more affordable imports from China.

Burkini ban and response

Although news of the burkini ban on several French beaches made headlines globally for more than a month, the ban did not spark outrage among the mainstream (white) non-Muslim French population. The local mayors who initiated the bans in the southern French towns on the grounds that it ‘was the uniform of extremist Islamism’, a threat to public order, unhygienic, and violated the principles of laïcité were supported by then Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who stated that the burkini was ‘not compatible with French values’ (Valls in Le Monde 2016a; see also Le Monde 2016b). Given that during a televised debate on popular free-to-air channel France 2 in January 2017, Valls had referred to the bare-breasted ‘Marianne’, symbol of the French republic: ‘that is what France is’ – and not a woman in a headscarf, he could have been expected to regard the iconic bare-breasted Marianne as more appropriate to French beaches than a woman in a burkini could ever hope to be (France 2 2017). His political opponent former President Sarkozy promised to make the burkini unconstitutional if he were re-elected.

Given the strong association between the burkini and Australia, it is unsurprising that Australia media outlets published a large volume of reports about the ban, with 103 reports published by the Australian media on the various bans compared to 287 in the UK, 76 in Canada and 77 in the US. In her study of international coverage of the burkini ban in France, Melodie Sommier (2016) found that newspaper articles published in Canada, the United States,
the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland represented France as the ‘deviant other’ for its failure to uphold liberal values. Similarly, the Australian media published numerous reports in which France was represented as not measuring up to the liberal example set by Australia. Ironically, media outlets with a track record of Islamophobic reporting on this occasion came to the defence of an innovative Australian product. This was epitomised by a *Daily Mail* report headlined ‘Meanwhile in Australia: Muslim mum wears a burkini as she teaches her kids to swim in a Sydney pool – as police force a woman to remove her head to toe bathing suit in France’, which juxtaposed a photograph of a burkini-clad Australian ‘Muslim mum’ and her children with the notorious photograph of the confrontation between armed police and a covered woman on the beach in Nice (Tolj 2016). Similarly, an editorial published in *The Australian* (2016) newspaper under the headline ‘Burkini ban a step too far’ described the demonisation of the burkini in France as being ‘a far cry from the swimsuit’s beginnings, not amid the medieval obscurantism of the so-called Islamic caliphate but on the beaches of Sydney, where it has been worn for years by swimmers and lifeguards doing club duty’. However, the editorial also noted that French sensitivity was ‘understandable’ given the trauma of the recent terrorist attacks and concluded by suggesting that in order to be ‘cautious’, Muslim women might like to choose ‘those other common Australian outfits’ of a pair of board shorts teamed with a rashie (*Australian* 2016). Elsewhere in the same newspaper, commentator Jennifer Oriel, claimed that there was no ‘compelling security rationale’ that would justify forcing the woman on the beach to disrobe but nonetheless asserted that there was ‘no place for a symbol [like the burkini] so at odds with a freethinking Western society’. In Oriel’s opinion, most Australian commentators had been overly sympathetic to this reviled symbol, depicting ‘[t]he burkini-clad woman as a victim of muscular secularism’ (Oriel 2016).

The most high-profile Australian coverage of the French burkini ban was a television report screened on Channel 7’s *Sunday Night* show. The previous year, the same program had aired what was billed as an ‘expose’ of the far-right Reclaim Australia movement. Editorials in subsequent days castigated the show for providing the extremist movement with a platform in its first ever television interview (Burke 2015; Dye 2015).

The program’s coverage of the burkini ban featured a segment in which an Australian Muslim medical student travelled to France with her parents because ‘she decided that she could no longer sit by and watch what was happening in France’. Zaynab Alshelh compared France unfavourably with Australia, and described the burkini as being ‘as Australian as you can get’. The report showed Alshelh adopting similar techniques of transversal enabling during her encounter in France to those widely undertaken during the process of post-Cronulla reconciliation: ‘It’s important to educate people that most Muslims are decent human beings, not terrorists. I’m Muslim, but I’m also a regular girl who goes to uni, plays netball and has a family.’

Although no ban was in force on in Villeneuve-Loubet at the time when the report was filmed, the program nonetheless screened footage in which the Alshelh and her mother were apparently threatened and abused until they eventually left the beach. This footage was reported by international media outlets including the BBC and CNN. The Mayor of Villeneuve-Loubet told *L’Express* that ‘She [Alshelh] cannot come innocently on our beaches like that with the religious habit that is a sign of the fundamentalism that battered us.’ However, the French newspaper *Nice-Matin* alleged that the report was misleading, claiming the Channel 7 had made use of hidden cameras and selective editing and that the French beachgoers had objected to having their families filmed, not to the women’s burkinis. In an article for *The Australian* headlined ‘Seven and its burkini family owe France an apology’, Emma Kate Symon described Alshelh as ‘flaunting her burkini in an obvious attempt to bait Gallic sun-lovers into religious and
ethnically motivated hatred’ and suggested that ‘perhaps the trainee doctor could use hidden camera techniques in Egypt on doctors practicing illegal female genital mutilation on the vast majority of little girls’ (Symon 2017). Rather than taking steps to address their own ingrained Islamophobia, then, Australian media outlets have found it easier to focus on Islamophobic practices and incidents overseas.

Conclusion

The discourse around the burkini in Australia and France illustrates the two societies’ differing experiences of colonialism, secularism and immigration as well as their contrasting attitudes and policies towards multicultural governance. It also demonstrates Islamophobia’s capacity to operate at both a global and a local level, travelling across borders and adapting itself to the microclimate of its new environment. From shock-jock fired moral panics about a local swimming pool in Sydney to the beaches of Nice amid populist political posturing around national elections in France, the ideological elements of Islamophobia are globally circulated, recycled and redeployed. Little can illustrate the insidiousness and pervasiveness of this ideology better than the example illustrated here, of the turning of a costume designed for participation and inclusiveness of Muslim women in the national culture into yet another symbol of their supposed self-segregation and unacceptable otherness.

Notes

1 Among them John Pilger, whose A Secret Country (1990) has Max Dupain’s iconic photograph, ‘The Sunbaker’, on the cover and as a centre plate.

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References


