CRITICAL EXPLORATIONS:
OTTOMAN EMPIRE & CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

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"‘Islamic-ness’ in the life of a commodity: Veiling-fashion in Turkey”

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Encina Hall West, Room 208

ABSTRACT: What makes a commodity ‘Islamic’? This paper focuses on the question of Islamic-ness as it traverses both material and symbolic production. Our study demonstrates the instability of ‘Islamic-ness’ in the veiling-fashion industry in Turkey and draws out the implications of this finding for our understanding of the socio-spatial work of the commodity. The veiling-fashion (or tesettür) sector has become a conspicuous part of the Turkish apparel industry in the past thirty years. Firms producing veiling-fashion engage in the design, production, marketing and sale of distinctive commodities stylized to signify Islamic-ness. We begin by situating veiling-fashion within the broader contours of the Turkish apparel industry, economic restructuring, and the rise of an Islamic habitus in Turkey. Based on our 2008 survey of 174 veiling-fashion firms in Turkey and our case studies of three such firms, we seek to understand how and to what extent the commodity is inscribed as an Islamic commodity in the course of its life, from financing to marketing. Through this analysis, we find that the Islamic-ness of the commodity cannot in fact be located or fixed; it is instead best understood as a mode of insertion into socio-spatial networks. Veiling-fashion as a commodity thus enters into and becomes constitutive of the wider material and symbolic networks that enact Islamic-ness in Turkey today.

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