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Negotiating secular boundaries: Pious micro-practices of Muslim women in French and German public spheres

This article discusses how religious Muslim women negotiate Islamic prayer and Islamic dress within French and German public spheres where Islamic connoted bodily practices are not easily accommodated. While these women perceive their practice first and foremost in terms of devotional practices with the objective to fashion and strengthen a pious self, within the context of these secular public spheres they also get entangled in (re-)signification processes. In order to grasp these specific shifts in the religious practices in question, the article discusses approaches that emphasise the role of corporeality in the shaping of religious subjects with those conducted in the field of performance theory.

Key words Islam, religious practice, public sphere, women, performativity

Introduction

Some time ago, I had dinner with Nassira, a young French Muslim woman of Algerian background with whom I had become friends during my fieldwork in an Islamic institute near Paris. We decided to meet at a subway station in the evening of a workday, right after Nassira got out from work. I had been at the station a couple of minutes before Nassira walked up to me, and I did not immediately recognise her as she looked quite different. In previous years, I had seen her only in a Muslim environment; while she only started wearing the headscarf one or two years ago, I had become used to her outfit and did not expect her to be without it. However, she came up to me wearing a fashionable white coat and, on her head, a beret of the same colour. She looked just like any other young, fashionable, Parisian woman. After greeting her and commenting on her appearance, she told me laughingly that this was her 'professional look'. As she was unable to work with her headscarf, she got used to going to work wearing a beret which she took off once in the office building. None of her colleagues knew about her being veiled. On our way to the restaurant, we talked about different things, from the difficulties caused by this daily unveiling and her reflections about how she might possibly introduce her veil into the office, to her yoga class of the day before. The restaurant she wanted to take me to was a Pakistani *halal* restaurant, and, as Nassira

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assured me, one where it was guaranteed that the meat was indeed *halal* and not only declared as such. That way she was not limited to the vegetarian dishes which she usually chose in restaurants. Once we arrived, she did not immediately sit down with me at the table but informed me that she wanted to 'change first', directing herself to the rest rooms. I did not understand right away, but when she came back, she had changed her beret for her regular headscarf. She exhaled deeply and smiled at me; evidently, the evening could begin.

This short episode addresses in a very lucid way the question I want to investigate in this article, that is, how do religious Muslim subjects move within a secular European society that is not very hospitable to certain Muslim ways of life? How do committed Muslim women like Nassira enact religious practices in public places despite numerous constraints? How do they cope with the stigma that visible religious practices confer on their body, thereby marking the body? And more broadly, what do these practices tell us about the possibilities for pluralism and plural forms of life within European public spheres?

In order to pursue this subject matter I draw on fieldwork conducted among Muslim women in France and Germany who engage in what can be considered the global Islamic revival movement.[1] They were all active in mainstream (orthodox) Islamic organisations with the objective of acquiring or disseminating Islamic knowledge. In the classes of these organisations, particapants learned not simply about the importance of the five daily ritual prayers (*salat*) but also of their punctual implementation. The Islamic requirement of female modesty assumed comparable importance. While priority was given here to modesty in the sense of a mode of conduct consisting of reserve and chastity, modesty often (but not always) materialised in the donning of the headscarf, understood by most of these women as a clear and unequivocal command set out in the Islamic scriptures. Also, the difficulties encountered in enacting religious practices in the different spheres of society (at school, university, or work) were frequently thematised in these centres. The importance they accorded to their very presence in these spheres was not only reasoned through motives of necessity, self-realisation or pleasure, but particularly through the desire for recognition as 'successful' and 'self-confident' Muslim women, something which they deemed to be crucial for improving representations of Islam in general.

I will explore the issue of these women's (embodied) religious practices within the public sphere by focusing in particular on the two above-mentioned practices, the ritual prayer and hijab. For my interlocutors, these religiously prescribed practices are, first and foremost, self-disciplines aiming to fashion the pious self (see also Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2007). However, in the context of diaspora and growing Islamophobia in Europe, such a perspective can only provide a limited analysis. This would presume that these practices are enacted only within an idealised, unproblematic, homogeneous Muslim space, away from any tensions and pressures inherent in the social relations governing heterogeneous public spheres. Obviously, this cannot be the case as most Muslims in Europe are present within the public spheres of the majority society. The requirement of enacting Islamic practices on a daily, constant and regular basis, such as the five daily prayers or the hijab, propels these practices into the diverse life worlds of

1 I conducted my fieldwork between 2002 and 2003 and in 2006 in the Paris region and in Cologne, including long-term participant observation in one Islamic institute in each country and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with veiled or non-veiled women active in these and other institutes.

these women. They cannot stay contained within the private household or an Islamic environment, but are, in one way or another, present in public life.

This presence is far from unproblematic. In France with its national ideology of *laïcité*, public spheres are defined in a more normative way than in other European societies; the demand on the individual is therefore stronger. It requires, among other things, respect for the 'obligation of restraint' which means refraining from a display of any signs of religious or other particularistic allegiances.[2] Thus, the introduction of prayer and Islamic modesty codes, most visibly embodied through the headscarf, into the public sphere, denotes a *de facto* questioning of the definition of the *laïque* public sphere. Germany does not share this understanding of strict secularity. Yet, Germany's lenience in regard to Christian religious practice within its public spheres, identified as being in continuity with a Christian-national heritage and therefore as 'discreet', is not extended to non-Christian religions and thus has similar effects for Islamic practices as the more strictly defined French secularism (Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). And irrespective of the particular national definitions of the place of religion in society (whether religion here takes an abstract sense or is linked to a dominant national identity), both countries share similar fears regarding their Muslim populations. Several public debates on 'problematic' Islamic practices in recent years in both countries expressed this clearly (Amir-Moazami 2007; Joppke 2007).

In this particular context, practices related to prayer and Islamic dress become a 'stigma', as Nilüfer Göle (2005) proposes in regard to the veil, by referring to the Goffmanien concept (a concept which illustrates compellingly how the body can become the site of social difference and public exclusion). Facing the question of how to enact these stigmatising gestures, my interlocutors' movements and styles oscillated between a higher and lower degree of visibility. At times, these approaches went along with particular claims on the majority society, claims motivated notably by the desire to change the negative image (religious) Muslims have, and, consequently, to make place for religious practices. When talking about these types of claims, the question of Muslim 'identity politics' inevitably comes up. This is an argument which literature on the Islamic revival, whether in Muslim majority societies or in the West, has often brought forward in order to explain the public visibility of these movements' practices (Haenni 2002; Ismail 2004; Nökel 2002; Roy 2002). Critiques of this type of analysis rightly object, however, that by reading the practices of the participants in the Islamic revival in such terms one notably reduces self-disciplines crucial for constituting pious subjects to mere signifying practices (Mahmood 2005).

Yet, once we ask how one might practice as a committed Muslim within the secular public spheres, we have to consider the perception of the majority of society towards these religious practices. Once these practices are performed within the framework of heterogeneous social relations, they are open to be signified by other members of society. I am particularly interested in understanding how the women respond to this signification process. To answer this question, I will discuss in this contribution the daily religious micro-practices, bodily and spatial practices which reveal the difficulties of enacting religious prescriptions such as the ritual prayer or the hijab in the public sphere. The theoretical framework proposed here will bring into discussion approaches

2 While this obligation legally only affects civil servants as well as pupils in public schools, in practice, it is required by everyone who participates in the (semi-) public spheres of social life, most notably at the job site (see Laborde 2005).

that have emphasised the role of corporeality in the making of religious subjects (e.g. Saba Mahmood) with insights from work in the field of performance theory (Michel de Certeau and Judith Butler).

Searching for sacred time in secular spaces: the predicament of *salat*

For my interlocutors, the regular and punctual exercise of the five ritual prayers is of crucial importance.[3] They were all concerned about praying within the different spheres of their active life (e.g. in university or at work). As a very bodily practice, a 'mobile corporal technique' (Henkel 2005: 305), *salat* allows the practitioner a continuity between her diverse life spaces, creating intimate, sacred spheres around the individual body. Further, the regular and punctual implementation of *salat* points to a non-secular way of experiencing time that also permeates modern life. As such, it constitutes (if not legally defined then, at least, viscerally sensed) an intrusion threatening the very definition of the public sphere that prevails in the 'social imaginary' (Taylor) of secular societies: a secular space governed by empty, homogeneous time. Beyond the specific secular connotations in French and German public spheres – although these spheres can be at times rather accommodating to certain forms of majoritarian, hence 'discreet' forms of religious practice – it is their alleged negative symbolic content which makes these practices often appear illegitimate. Ritual prayer represents for the contemporary secular gaze, a 'dramatic gesture of submission' (Henkel 2005: 487).[4] Watch, for instance, the images regularly screened on European television where praying Muslims are shown in a bowing position – the embodied performance of submission – filmed from the back, pictures most often stripped from any notion of aesthetics.[5] When upheld by second generation Muslims, praying is at times discussed as an indicator for a lack of integration and even for a turn towards fundamentalism.[6]

Thus, in national contexts where Islamic ritual prayer is not easily accommodated (as is the case in particular in France but also in Germany), demanding a prayer space equals a form of claim-making. If, in the workplace, these claims are rather rare for the risk they involve, at university my interlocutors usually show themselves to be much more demanding. However, these acts of claiming were more frequent in Germany. In France, these claims often met strong opposition. University, it must be noted, is imagined by a lot of women in the beginning to be a space of freedom, in particular after

3 This is the outcome of a process of becoming pious, stimulated notably within the centres of Islamic learning that my interlocutors attended. See Jouili (2008a).

4 The scepticism against Islamic religious (bodily) practices is, of course, not of recent nature. With its detailed choreography, essentially visual and corporal, nineteenth century British travellers to Egypt, for example, described *salat* among other Islamic practices not only as 'sensual, primitive and irrational', but because of its ritualism and mechanism as detrimental for 'the religion of the heart' and for the 'growth of internal piety' (Starrett 1995: 955–956). Bodily movements were thus considered to inhibit mental activity, reflection and interiority (ibid.)

5 Sabine Schiffer (2005) has made this remark in her analysis of the representation of Islam in the German media landscape.

6 Michèle Tribalat considers the diminishing practice of prayer as a clear sign of the advocated cultural integration (Tribalat 1996: 254). John Bowen observes that in France the fact of whether a young man prays or not can have significant consequences when he is suspected of engaging in terrorist activities (Bowen 2004: 32).

having attended French public school (for many French women it is here that they are able to wear the headscarf 'full-time' for the first time). However, within this alleged 'space of freedom' they quickly recognise the potential difficulties of introducing other religiously connoted practices. Hence, prayer has become a site of struggle over the definition of space, generating strong tensions which have sometimes been played out in a very performative way, as this young French Moroccan woman recalls from her student years.

> 'We used to pray under the staircase, outside the building. But to bother us, the secretaries walked their dogs there to dirty the place. My brother told me that they prayed in a room in the basement of his university. But when the janitors found out, they closed the room. The students decided to pray in the hall in front of everyone. Finally, the administrators preferred to reopen the room. There are a lot of stories like that.'

While some German interviewees had also encountered difficulties, they were fewer and less dramatic than the above stated account – an account that was not at all unique among my French informants. In Germany, universities frequently provide a prayer room for students, and if they do not have one, religious Muslim students often occupy any empty location they can find. One German-Palestinian woman states:

> 'At university, [. . .] sometimes we went to pray in the department of Islamic studies. We asked a professor if we can have a room, sometimes, we just took any room and prayed there. We are aware that people could see us, but that didn't disturb us. We were adult by now. In school, it was rather like, oh, people can see me pray, they will ridicule me. There was not yet that self-confidence.'

Note that this testimony establishes a direct link between the ability to perform Islamic practices in secular public spheres and self-confidence. This is a point which is frequently made by my interlocutors. Self-confidence seems then to become one of the preconditions for maintaining one's religious practice in daily life as it is necessary for acquiring the strength to confront the Other's gaze when performing *salat*, or, for that matter, wearing the hijab. However, the issue I want to stress here is how prayer as a 'spatial practice' in the sense Henri Lefebvre (2000) theorises, becomes a site of struggle for the ideological definition of a certain space. In both accounts we witness an interesting shift regarding the ritual daily prayer. Notwithstanding the importance of understanding religious (ritual) practices in their role of constituting certain types of subjects, these cases also suggest the necessity of exploring the signifying aspects these practices adopt in certain contexts. When Muslims pray within a non-Muslim social environment, the prayer gets invested with meanings that are not related to the enacted bodily practice as such. Confronted with a hostile and wary Other, *salat* is de-contextualised and emerges as a site of difference and of contestation. In such a reading of *salat*, I am drawing freely on Judith Butler's insights on possibilities for re-signification of performative practices. In her work *Bodies that matter*, she pinpoints the gaps and flaws in the performativities conceived as 'citational practices' by which sexed and gendered subjects are continuously fashioned, in order to identify the sites where the contestation of regulatory norms take place. According to Butler, it is through the 'de-contextualisation' of a performative practice, that is, through 'the

rehearsal of the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways', that sites emerge for re-signification, thereby 'assuming meanings and functions for which [they were] never intended' (Butler 1997:147). However, in the context of Muslims praying, visible to the public eye, in public spaces such as university, the contestation is quite different: de-contextualised *salat* is not contesting the norms they 'cite', that is, prayer does not become a site for questioning Islamic norms. Rather, a 'de-contextualised' *salat* questions norms external to itself. In the context of taken-for-granted secular–religious dichotomies, prayers performed visibly in secular public spheres turn into contestations of these very dichotomies, as do claims for recognising Muslim practices as legitimate in these spheres.

Yet, the desired recognition of Muslim religious practice is often impossible to achieve. To claim a space for prayer can engender situations that are too difficult and conflict-ridden, something that many interlocutors preferred to avoid. This is why many opt to conform themselves more or less to the normative conduct in secular public spheres, hiding their prayer from this scene. Certain women made up their prayers at the end of the day. But this was the least appreciated solution given the importance they attached to a punctually and regularly performed prayer.[7] Other interlocutors made an effort to find a mosque or prayer room near university or the work place where they could go during breaks. As soon as they occupied a new space (a new job, university, etc.), they explored the neighbourhood with this objective. Others, again, looked at university or at work for a well hidden place where they could perform the prayer without too much danger of being seen. The search for such a place often turned into a wholly exploratory enterprise leading my informants to discover notably the basements of the buildings with their many and rarely frequented rooms. Considered by many a safe hideout, they then became informal praying rooms. However, praying secretly often induces fear of being discovered by colleagues, superiors or university staff. This is why other informants, especially in France, preferred to perform prayers when in 'difficult' spaces in an immobile sitting position. This is a valid option ratified in the Islamic centres where this practice is advised as a helpful technique to deal with the restrictions encountered in the public sphere. At university, as much as at the workplace this becomes a viable option for many interlocutors, as Aziza, a French-Tunisian student in Paris, explains:

> 'Al-hamdulillah, Islam is also the religion of ease, thus, there are many facilitations that allow us to have a flexibility in the religious practice. . [. . .] In regard to prayer, for, example, you can do it in a sitting position. At the library, I do it on a chair, normal. . [. . .] I move my lips but as I have a book in front of me, it goes unnoticed. Perhaps I move a little bit my head, to help myself, like, now I'm in a bowing position, now I get up. [. . .] Just to help me concentrate, you know, because it is not easy.'

I have heard numerous accounts of women revealing where and in what circumstances they have performed prayers in such a way, whether in the train, the car, or at work. But in her comment Aziza also highlights the extent to which prayer is a self-practice where the concern for a highly focused attitude is always present. It further evokes how this flexibility is inherent in the Islamic teachings, an argument

7 My interlocutors, similar to the women studied by Mahmood (2005), deemed a regular and punctual practice as one of the necessary conditions of acquiring the appropriate inner attitude during prayer.

which is often mentioned by my interlocutors and in the classes I attended in the Islamic centres, emphasising thereby the capacity of the Islamic religion to adapt itself to the requirements of modern life.

While often invisible to the external observer, the effort to perform *salat* in a punctual and regular manner governs the daily life of my interlocutors and requires much of their attention. To accomplish *salat* in these 'profane' places, such as university or the workplace, so that it goes unnoticed by one's environment demands not only a certain level of Islamic knowledge (in particular *fiqh al-'ibadat*) in order to know the rules for the facilitation of devotional practice, but also a familiarity with the places one dwells, and, finally, a good amount of creativity. In situations where my interviewees have the feeling that they cannot claim a 'right to pray', the desire to pray punctually leads to the enactment of 'tactics' (de Certeau 1984) subverting the restrictive secular spaces according to their needs.[8] Visibly, they consume the public or semi-public spaces they inhabit, according to (un)written rules of the majority society. Yet, invisibly they search for possibilities to circumvent them, to re-appropriate these spaces without being recognised, in order to enable their Islamic practice. These micro-practices, appearing so banal that they are easily overlooked, nevertheless 'manipulate space' in significant ways. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau analyses the 'creative' ways through which individuals consume, in everyday life, the dominant cultural, economic, technocratic, and spatial orders of society, thereby individualising the constraining social structures. These practices are, according to de Certeau: 'the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life.' (de Certeau 1984: xiv). Opposing an analysis of power which only takes into account its 'subjecting' quality, thereby foreclosing an understanding of possibilities of 'resistance', he strives 'to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'.' (De Certeau 1984).[9] Regarding spatial practices, then, one can discern a discrepancy between the collective mode of managing space and the individual mode of re-appropriating it. All these practices together construct a specific topography of everyday Muslim piety within secular public spheres in an urban context. However, while these tactics clearly have a subversive nature, de Certeau acknowledges that they are far from being independent from power. They escape from the 'discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised.' (De Certeau 1984: 96). Their subversive character emerges exactly where they purport to obey the normative structures.

To veil or not to veil . . . confrontation or modes of passing

As mentioned before, most of my interlocutors, whether wearing the headscarf or not, considered covering one's head was mandatory for Muslim women. If around a third of

8 De Certeau defines a 'tactic' as follows: 'a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional) localisation, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the Other. A tactic insinuates itself into the Other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.' (1984: xix).

9 Here, de Certeau notably engages critically with Foucault's account of power in *Discipline and Punish*.

my interlocutors did not wear a headscarf, this fact was never advocated in a way that led to any substantial questioning of the necessity of the headscarf; most wished to wear it.[10] Rather, their decisive argument was the fear of expected negative reactions from the larger society triggered by this practice and in particular the expected negative consequences in regard to their professional life. The headscarf debates in both countries – instigating processes leading to legal prescriptions – have not only proscribed the headscarf in certain places; the atmosphere it provoked has also contributed to the tightening of possibilities of action for veiled women in other (notably professional) fields.

Thus, given the constraints they find themselves in, my interlocutors' sartorial practices also always reflect their conscious consideration of the question of visibility. Yet, one should not simplistically oppose an 'Islamic dress' (that is veiled) to an 'un-Islamic dress' (that is unveiled) as being 'covered' is a practice which is much subtler than one might imagine. First, it is important to keep in mind that being 'unveiled' does not relieve pious women from the effort of 'covering' themselves: they also take great care to wear clothes that conceal the body and are ample enough not to accentuate the female figure. Second, to wear or not to wear a headscarf are not two stable and fixed states; there can be several intermediary states as well as a back and forth movement. The different ways of wearing the headscarf which I observed among my correspondents are: veiled only for prayer or when inside Islamic associations; veiled once out of the workplace (as demonstrated in my introductory remarks), while at the same time reducing the temporary 'openness' to a minimum by wearing turtle-neck shirts and tying the hair together in a strict way; veiled by wearing discreet head gear such as a beret or a scarf which is attached at the back of the neck (a cover which is not immediately recognisable as an Islamic head cover but tends to signify 'ethnic' fashion); veiled by wearing a discreet head gear during work or studies and a 'conventional' hijab outside these spaces. Therefore, the dichotomy between visible and invisible is diluted through the multiple and changing ways of covering one's head. We find a myriad 'ways of doing' (Certeau 1984) which constitute once again 'tactics' aimed at maintaining the requirement for modest dress as much as possible. This might lead, if successful, to a subversion of the interdiction of the headscarf. Consider, for example, the remarks of Aziza, the French-Tunisian university student mentioned earlier, recalling this kind of experience from her high school days:

> 'Well, actually, I didn't wear it, I put it off at the entrance [of the school building]. At one moment, I started to wear it like this, like a turban, but only in the front, you see, in the back, it was open, and it was pretty. Most of my teachers didn't really notice, they thought it was only a style, except one teacher, my history teacher. You know, most of the history teachers are hardliner atheists. [. . .]' [11]

As described here, but also in the brief ethnographic excerpt in the beginning of this article, veiling 'part time', that is to say, notably outside of one's professional activities,

10 Talal Asad (2006) rightly points to the fact that if French public discourse regularly asks itself whether a veiled woman truly 'desires' her veil, the same is never asked in regard to unveiled Muslim women and their condition of being uncovered. This is so, he continues, because it is naturally assumed that an unveiled Muslim woman does not wear the headscarf because of a lack of desire.

11 The experience Aziza evoked took place before 2004. At this time, public schools still had various different policies for handling veiled students.

is an option which is regularly engaged in by my interlocutors (more frequently in France where many have already got used to this daily unveiling at school). For some it was a sort of temporary solution, which became unbearable at a certain point.[12] For others, like for my friend Nassira, it seemed to have become a permanent situation. The daily unveiling for work can hence be considered one such 'tactic' to reconcile contradictory requirements: the headscarf and a professional career. These women long to continue wearing the headscarf; a self-practice intimately linked to their effort to lead a pious life as well as a constitutive element of their public identity. When they do not feel capable (anymore) of bearing the social consequences of the headscarf, notably in terms of professional marginalisation, the possibility of taking off the headscarf during work hours allows these women to continue considering themselves 'veiled' and engaging in particular ethical self-practices while also pursuing a professional career.

In the effort to introduce modest dress into their different life worlds which are actually hostile to this practice, my informants tried to appear in ways that are not immediately deciphered as signifiers of Islamic practice. Thereby they engaged in strategies that make it more difficult to read the 'marked' Muslim female body. The simulation of the 'unmarked' body has been widely discussed within feminist and post-colonial theory, denoted there as 'passing'. These theories have employed this term notably to reveal the constructivity of fixed identities and their signifiers and to open up possibilities for subverting the original categories, the boundaries between female and male, between white and black, coloniser and colonised (Ahmed 1999; Butler 1993; Tyler 1994). Here, again, I would argue in a similar fashion to earlier on in this paper that the 'passing' enacted by many of my interlocutors did not aim at blurring identities, nor did it question or deconstruct the moral project these women embody, that is, the goal of living a God-pleasing life. Rather 'passing' here aimed at challenging the secular-religious dichotomy which governs definitions of the public sphere in order to create a space for a particular way of life not tolerated in this sphere.

One significant aspect linked not only to strategies of 'passing' but also to a more visible approach is the aestheticisation of the Islamic dress. Several studies have recognised the importance veiled women in Europe give to their outer appearance and have studied the divergent sartorial practices which related modest dress to fashion (Nökel 2002; Moors and Tarlo 2007; Weibel 2000). Sigrid Nökel (2002), for instance, linked the fashionable dress style of veiled women to their will to dissociate themselves from the generation of their mothers. This generation of migrants was associated either with the status of a housewife or a domestic worker, without language skills and most often regarded as 'illiterate', thus, occupying a very marginal place in society. It is this generation which embodied the image of the traditional and 'oppressed' Muslim woman. My interlocutors, too, often assessed the headscarf of the generation of mothers (and grandmothers) as the reflection of traditionalism rather than of a conscious decision stemming from 'real understanding'. So, according to these women, wearing the headscarf 'differently' by aestheticising it, should signify that the headscarf is the result of 'personal choice' and of 'self-confidence', thus, expressing one's capacity to

12 Given my interlocutors' approach to the headscarf as a self-practice significant for shaping the pious self, several stated that the daily unveiling had caused a 'decrease of their faith'. Others suffered from the lack of correspondence between inner feelings and outward look, a situation which they considered 'hypocritical'.

be a reflexive and autonomous actor. Within a liberal political culture this rendition of the headscarf becomes the only way to free the latter from its oppressive flavour. Here, a concept of personhood is valorised in which freedom and agency are understood as the ability to live one's life in accordance with one's own genuine desires, without interference from outside. It is true that the idea of the 'duty' of the headscarf does not lend itself to being discussed in the idealised language of free choice.[13] Yet, the women's insistence on a 'real understanding' and on 'being convinced of its well-foundedness' prior to the donning of the headscarf is surely well in line with this principle. Moreover, the distinguished style signals individuality and originality, something which is equally denied to veiled women. Thus, through the restyling of the headscarf, thereby re-signifying it, my interlocutors hope to render possible its acceptance and facilitate their entrance with this item into the public sphere. However, such sartorial practices are not sufficient by themselves. My interlocutors usually insist on the fact that they have to be accompanied by a conduct which signals restraint and openness, while at the same time, self-assurance and politeness. In this communication project, linguistic competencies play a crucial role as the absence of such a competency is the first marker of the status of a stranger, a status that the veiled woman is frequently associated with. Such an approach is clearly revealed in Aziza's comment:

> 'You speak good French, you are young, [. . .] and then, I want to say, you aren't ugly, you aren't trying to hide yourself out of a complex [. . .]. Well you know how to value yourself. In addition, you are a smiling person, you talk with people, you match your headscarf with your clothes. This shows that you wear it out of choice, with pleasure, out of conviction, you see that this is a blossoming person. [. . .] So, after all, the communication is very important, your conduct is important, your look, the relation you have with people, *al-islam din al-mu'amalat* [Islam is the religion of social relations].'

Here, again, we witness how disciplinary practices concerned with fashioning a particular type of self and, hence, not reducible to signifying practices are obliged to engage in a re-signifying effort, because they are *read* by the majority society in a way that denies their legitimacy. This re-signification is enacted through everyday micro-politics, conscious and reflexive actions which become constitutive elements in the struggle for recognition as pious but 'modern' Muslim women. What I have described here represents indeed similarities with identity politics lead by other minority groups, where authenticity, originality, and reflexivity materialise in a body project in order to redefine the marginalised subject which aspires to recognition. However, we should not consider these two aspects of this practice as standing next to each other in an isolated and conflicting manner. Note that the women's effort to re-signify the stigmatised headscarf through a certain behaviour is embedded, as Aziza's comment exposes, within a discourse of Islamic ideals of social conduct. While the 'good conduct' by a veiled woman has a representative function, it itself requires the practicing of certain embodied values. The women often acknowledge the difficulties of enacting this 'perfect' social conduct and emphasise that the representative function they hold as visible Muslims constitutes not only a further motivation but also an important reminder

13 Michael Sandel (1998) discusses pertinently the problems which arise when a liberal political culture valorises such language for representing religious practices whose logic cannot be grasped through the ideals of freedom and autonomy. See also Fernando (2007).

for enacting this conduct. Thus, it becomes apparent that not only must the headscarf in this context be understood as a self-fashioning practice, but also as a signifying practice. It also requires a more thorough investigation into the complex articulation of both dimensions. This raises the question of to what extent the disciplinary aspect of the headscarf as a self-technique depends on and sustains itself through particular meanings it conveys in specific contexts. Consequently, the effect this practice has on the habituation of the body, on shaping the self, cannot be so easily disconnected from the meaning it signifies and represents.

Resignifying the religious Muslim body: what's at stake?

In the previous parts of this contribution, I have discussed the multiple 'tactics' employed by my interlocutors the public sphere in public life in order to enable themselves to pursue their religious practices in spite of the experienced hostility towards their mode of life. By doing so, it should be recalled, my focus was clearly on an analysis of these practices in their particular relation to public spheres experienced as restrictive.

My interviewees responded to inhospitality towards Islamic practices within these spheres in two distinct ways. One possible response was to visibly resist the restrictions, that is, to try to impose their practice, not shying away from possible confrontations. Prayer and hijab, in this particular context, are propelled forward to become signifiers for legitimacy claims and even defiance. In this sense, their strategies could be said to resemble contemporary minority groups' struggles for recognition through the privileging of 'visibility'. Being partly fashioned by a liberal political culture that gives voice to (at least certain) discourses of recognition, young pious Muslims with a cultural capital that enables them to speak that language (unlike the often less articulate parents' generation), also draw at times on this language.[14] They do so in order to reject the negative image attached to Muslims claiming pride for one's stigmatised religious identity (see Göle 2005). Yet, notwithstanding these apparent semblances between Muslim and other identity politics, we have to recall once again that, for my interlocutors, prior to becoming 'signifiers' in the course of this action, these Islamic practices are enacted through a quite different logic which cannot be grasped through 'signification'. That these practices are only contingently, following particular circumstances, and not substantially 'signifiers' for certain 'identity politics' becomes all the more evident when looking at the second approach my interlocutors adopted. In situations where the power imbalance was judged too unfavourable towards them, religious practices took place in a way unrecognisable to the public eye, by using different tactics that render invisible the markers which stigmatise. This highlights the fact that the principle objective for this practice still remains the exercise of one's religious duty.

Nevertheless, I have demonstrated throughout this article that the contextual conditions of German and French public spheres significantly impacts their self-understanding. They fashion their notions of self in specific ways which also bear

14 Lois McNay (2008: 188) points to the fact that the discourse of recognition is more easily mastered by privileged social groups.

upon their relation to the religious practices they enact. I have discussed extensively how the religious practices in question were frequently (although not always) and in different ways engaged in a work of (re-)signification. Moreover, we must not forget that the basic motivation of my informants to participate in crucial domains of the majority society's public sphere was the desire to change the common representation of the Muslim woman. They notably wanted to challenge the image of the 'oppressed' Muslim woman who leads a restricted existence confined to the private sphere of family life. In the remainder of this article I want to briefly reflect on how those practices that have to be read in terms of representation and (re-)signification can tell us something about the particularities of Islamic subjectivities in contemporary Europe.

The re-signification efforts my interlocutors engage in are a conscious response to the fact that Muslims, and Muslim women more specifically, have become politicised signifiers. The consequences of this development have become evident in the rejection my interlocutors' religious practices faced so frequently within the larger majority society. The principle cause is the public discourse that has constructed Muslim women, and in particular those who are religiously committed, as problem cases (see Amir-Moazami forthcoming). In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler analyses the processes that constitute subjects through discourse. A subject, she maintains, is one who, constituted 'through the address of the Other becomes then a subject capable of addressing others.' (Butler 1997: 26). While the subject is, thus, constituted by social discourse, it is not determined by it, as the address also renders possible the agency to respond. However, as the response has to be situated within the norms set out by the prior address, the 'vulnerability to the Other' is 'never overcome in the assumption of agency' (Butler 1997). While the response is then limited, it is still characterised by a certain openness that leaves sufficient place for operations of re-signification. The promise for resignification lies, according to Butler, in the fact that the signified cannot be represented fully and finally. That is to say, the subject-position can never be exhaustively described by a signifier (Butler 1993: 191ff).[15]

I draw here partially on Butler's account of subjectivity as a product of social discourse and as a site of re-signifiability in order to better understand how my interlocutors' subject-positions and subsequent practices have to be thought of in connection to the discourses present in the public sphere. It should be clear that when making use of the above mentioned thoughts formulated by Butler I do not intend to reduce the understanding of subjectivity and of the body's materiality to discursive production. The problematic assumptions inherent in her approach have been widely discussed (Hollywood 2002; Mahmood 2005; McNay 1999, 2008). Further, I do not perceive my interviewees' performances in the public sphere as solely reacting to the pressures of social discourse. As emphasised several times, they are embodied

15 In *Bodies that matter* (1993), Butler discusses this inherent and continual 'misrecognition' of the signified by engaging critically with Žižek's Lacanian account of political signifiers. Žižek argues in *The sublime object of ideology* (1989) that the discursive constitution of the subject is intrinsically connected to an act of foreclosure of a 'traumatic, real kernel', or, in Lacanian words, the 'real'. In this sense, the 'misrecognition' (*méconnaissance*) does not destroy a 'true self', but allows one to see that there is a 'true self'. Butler's appropriation of this idea of the failure of the signifier, however, questions the Lacanian, almost ontological account of the 'real'. For her, this is not the 'result of an existential void, but [. . .] of that term's incapacity to include social relations that it provisionally stabilises through a set of contingent exclusions.' (Butler 1993: 220–21).

practices of self-cultivation which are not so easily captured by concepts which refer to representation and signification.[16]

Yet, to go back to my argument and notwithstanding the outlined objections, it has to be acknowledged that my interlocutors' subject-positions and subjectivities are, in fact, partially constituted by the discursive climate of the public spheres of their respective societies. In public debates, the naming of the religious Muslim female subject is defined by the impossibility of imagining (and thus naming) her through qualities that are part of European self-descriptions, such as, for instance, 'modern', 'aesthetic', 'civil, or 'professional'. When my interlocutors try to re-signify the religious Muslim female subject (through re-signifying their mere presence in the public sphere as well as the concrete religious practices in this sphere), then, they also always do appropriate some of these ideals from which they are generally disassociated – ideals that have equally fashioned my interlocutors' own sensibilities and desires.[17] That is, not only do they aspire to certain of the attributes that make up European self-descriptions from which they have been previously excluded, they also desire to be recognised as Muslim female subjects sharing exactly these attributes with the majority society.

Interestingly, these 'ideals' are also considered by these women as *conforming* to the Islamic tradition in which they inscribe themselves. Thus, being 'aesthetic', 'civil' or 'professional' are not necessarily considered exclusively European attributes, but also authentic Islamic qualities for which even textual evidence exists. The particularity, then, of the public performances discussed here is that they occur at an interface section: they tell us not only about my interlocutors' being fashioned by ideals stemming from the dominant majority culture, but also about the reconfiguration of the Islamic traditions themselves through a new set of affects and sensibilities by its practitioners which re-interpret the traditions through the vocabularies at their disposition. This reconfiguration is not, however, happening in an open-ended and free-floating way, but takes place within the ethical and theological horizon provided by those traditions.

In this sense, my interlocutors' bodily and spatial practices have to be situated within the complex web constructed by regulatory regimes of German and French public spheres (*as well as* by those of the Islamic tradition). Within this 'field of enabling constraints' (Butler 1997: 16) their performances do possess a quality of *poeisis*: these performances or tactics can be read as an extremely creative employment of body and space, subverting in multiple ways the constraints of secular public spheres which seem to render impossible the exercise of one's religious duties. Again, caution should be exercised so as not to be led to celebrate this creativity simply as another account of minority groups' resistances. Behind these creative tactics lie hard decisions sometimes involving significant and painful sacrifices. The most obvious example here would be the question of whether to wear or not to wear a headscarf in public spheres. If the decision is answered in the affirmative, the pious practitioner often has to accept severe sanctions (for example in regard to her professional life); however, resolving to take off one's headscarf at work, for instance, provokes equally intense feelings of humiliation

16 See S. Mahmood (2005, 161–67).

17 This is, even while emerging from similar conditions, a quite different way of responding to the structural constraints of secular public spheres than those enacted by 'secular' Muslims, analysed so sharply by Ruth Mas (2006).

or guilt. Thus, the tactics employed here, making up a specific public performance, are answers to deeply felt moral questions.[18]

Concluding remarks

I was interested in showing in this paper to what extent pious self-practices which, initially, have to be thought of as means for transforming the self – and as such existing prior to and beyond a logic of signification – had to be re-conceptualised when involved in complex and conflict-ridden social relations. The public performances that my friend Nassira and the other women enacted responded in two interrelated ways to the discourses on Muslims and its ensuing disciplinary effects within the public sphere. The women aimed at carving out as much space as possible for the execution of their Islamic duties. At the same time, this carving out of space for embodied religious practices always anticipated the readings that could potentially be made. This also explains the diverse strategies they adopted. The sometimes tragic micro-practices involved in these performances inevitably raise questions of how to make secular public spheres more hospitable for different ways of life, practices which evoke different loyalties and temporalities than their homogeneous definitions that are considered the legitimate ones. These questions, in order to be answered, require not so much rational debate where Muslims explain the 'good' reasons for their practices (see Habermas 2006), but rather a self-critical reflection from the part of the majority society to investigate why Islamic practices provoke these negative responses.

Talal Asad has rightly stated that public spheres are '*necessarily* (not just contingently) articulated by power' (Asad 2003: 184). And this power not only shapes the public sphere's space given to free speech, but more so, it constitutes 'sensibilities – memories and aspirations, fears and hopes – of speakers and listeners', 'the manner in which they exist', and it shapes 'their propensity to act or react in distinct ways' (ibid.: 185). As such, visceral discomfort elicited in certain 'secular' oriented subjects when perceiving, for instance, a veiled body performing *salat* on a university campus can only be understood if we acknowledge that these acts might constitute a 'dislocation of [a] moral world' (ibid.). William Connolly's merit is to have reflected exactly about these visceral registers of subjectivity determining public life and ignored in doctrines of liberalism and/or secularism. Therefore, the civic virtues he advocates, in order to allow for a pluralist public sphere where different ways of life can flourish, have to work on this visceral register to enable more responsive and engaging attitudes between different constituencies (cf. Connolly 1999, 2005). However, whether 'critical responsiveness', one such civic virtue Connolly promotes, or rather 'amygdalic panic', another of Connolly's locutions, will be incited at the sight of my interlocutors' practices will strongly depend on the responsible actions of the different participants in the public discourse.

18 Given the emphasis of this paper on the bodily and spatial practices of my informants in their performative relation to the hegemonically defined public spheres, the complex reasoning underlying the different choices that lead to enacting a multitude of tactics is an issue that could not be addressed within the scope of this paper. I have tried a tentative reflection elsewhere (Jouili 2008b).

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