“I’m Trying to Give Them My Face.” Everyday Embodied Agency of the Muslim Other in Amsterdam

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Focusing on the Muslim Other in Amsterdam, the article explores how individual young Muslims embody their agency in the forms of micro-practices and socio-spatial relations. By highlighting the spatio-corporeal aspects of Muslims’ presence within urban space, our ethnography foregrounds how young Muslims negotiate identities and belonging within everyday urban spaces of encounter. Dealing with the everyday panoptical white Othering gaze, we describe a range of “unremarkable” ordinary practices and everyday small agencies that young Muslims in Amsterdam adopt including invisibility, challenging whiteness, and accumulating whiteness.

KEYWORDS: Amsterdam; encounter; everyday agency; the body; the Muslim Other; whiteness.

INTRODUCTION

Dutch society has experienced different approaches toward Muslims. During the 1980s and 1990s, political debates revolved around the integration of the newcomers into Dutch society through learning the language, norms, and values to participate in society through profession and education (Creighton 2020; FORUM 2010; Gazzah 2010). However, some events in the early 2000s shifted the public opinion: 9/11/2001 New York, 3/11/2004 Madrid, 7/7/2005 London, and the murders of film director Theo van Gogh in 2004 and Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 who was one of the first to run a political campaign against Islam and Muslims as a threat to western liberal values (Cesari 2009; Creighton 2020). Political debates have focused on the position of Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands whether Islam and Islamic lifestyles are compatible with Dutch society (De Koning 2013; Pertwee 2017).

After van Gogh’s killing, for instance, the government set up the National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism and Security (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid or NCTV). Such preemptive measures across Dutch society, as Welten and Abbas (2021) show, have further Otherized Dutch Muslims.
Relatedly, from 2006 onward, the expressions of attitude toward immigrants have steadily increased through voting for the Party for Freedom, an overtly anti-Muslim party headed by Geert Wilders which suggests a hardening of sentiment toward Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands (Creighton 2020). In addition, similar in Denmark, France, Belgium, Austria, and Germany, on August 1, 2019, the so-called “Burqa Ban” came into force in the Netherlands which bans the face-covering clothing in certain places including governmental buildings, educational institutions, hospitals, and public transport. The law targets and limits certain Muslim women’s access to certain civil, social, educational, health, and police services as well as their geographic mobility pushing them farther into socio-spatial isolation (Hass 2020).

As Valenta (2019) avers, “Burqa Ban” is part of a European-wide surge in the symbolic, penal, and Islamophobic biopolitics, targeted toward those who refuse to obey and submit to the state.

As Van den Bogert (2021) stresses, Muslims in the Netherlands are seen as inferior to the “true” white Dutch majority, unassimilable Others manifested through their embodiments as unemancipated, lower-class immigrants. Muslims in the Netherlands are regularly imagined as bearded men in white dresses, oppressed women with headscarves, and agitated radical young men who cause troubles. All Muslims in the West are allegedly ignorant with inadequate linguistic proficiency, with low educational background, with un-/under-skilled jobs, if employed at all, who live in (self-)segregated (sub)urban working-class areas (Listerborn 2015; Rath 2014). Muslims and particularly young Muslims have been accustomed to disaffection and dissatisfaction in a climate of Othering, anxiety, and fear orchestrated by Dutch politicians and media depicting them as the ultimate problem group (Welten and Abbas 2021). A sharp line has been drawn between non-Muslims (us) and Muslims (them) making it almost impossible to be Muslim and Dutch simultaneously. Islam has become the most important identity marker for “foreigners” (Gazzah 2010) to the extent that even white Muslims and converts are seen as outsiders.

For Modood (2013, 2019; also Modood and Thompson 2021), Othering is a process through which a dominant group assigns negative properties to a subordinate group making that minority the Other, inferior, threatening. The Othering of Muslims takes different forms such as racialization, alienation, discrimination, exclusion, and structural oppression (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019). A racialized form of Othering, as Modood and Thompson (2021) argue, derives from distinctive bodily features which impute a negative and stereotypical image to Muslims. This narrative assigns Muslims to a prototypical body: a body with a brown skin tone, limited linguistic skills, and signs of religion such as the beard and the veil (Hamzeh 2011; Love 2009; Sargent and Larchanche 2007; Selod 2015; Selod and Embrick 2013).

In light of the above, then, how do Muslims “get on with life” in the time of the backlash of multiculturalism, rising white nationalism, populist xenophobia, and the increase in the number of anti-Muslim acts in many Western countries? While Islamophobia is mostly visible in the political discourses and media coverage, Othering is lived and experienced in the daily micro-practices of urban living. To disturb such dominant Othering processes that affect the everyday lives of Muslims, Dunn and Kamp (2009) have argued that a starting point is to focus on the everyday agency
and activities of Muslims in the West. Exploring the local instances of claiming agency and the socio-spatial practice of identity management in the context of the Muslim Other shed light on what it means to be a Muslim today in the West.

Focusing on the Othering within everyday urban spaces of encounter, we embark upon the ways through which young Dutch Muslims in Amsterdam exercise their small agencies to negotiate their identities and belonging within their everyday lives. The main objective of this study is thus to understand how young Muslims socio-spatially negotiate potential tensions between their embodiments and the dominant cultural framework of whiteness (O’Brien 2015). In the context of this article, we approach agency as a set of culturally learned ways of staying away from “troubles” as well as ways of applying personal interpretations of religion and expressing choice by which Muslims respond to their subjected Othering (Driezen et al. 2021; Ellefsen and Sandberg 2021; Mahmood 2005).

We unpack the everyday small agency of the Muslim Other and explore a range of messy, complex, and often contradictory agential encounters which sit differently within different socio-spatialities. We identify ordinary micro-practices that individual young Muslims adopt to respond to anti-Muslim racism within the Dutch urban context. Putting the Dutch case into conversation with the literature on the urban Muslim communities and identities in the United States (Mansson McGinty et al. 2013; Mansson McGinty 2012, 2020; Sziarto et al. 2013), Australia (Dunn et al. 2016; Itaoui 2016; Mikola et al. 2016), the United Kingdom (Finlay and Hopkins 2019, 2020; Hopkins et al. 2017; Warren 2019), France (Hancock 2020; Najib and Hopkins 2019, 2020), Sweden (Listerborn, 2015), and other European countries (Elahi and Khan 2017; Law et al., 2019; Woodward and Lukens-Bull 2018) will further enrich scholarly debates on the Muslim agency (Dwyer 1999; Dwyer and Shah 2009; Dwyer and Uberoi 2009; Hopkins 2009; Phillips 2009).

An urban ethnography on the notion of agency understood and employed by young Muslims in their pursuit of everyday life in Amsterdam as well as their rhetoric and discursive experiences of being the Other compose the main approach toward the analysis and presentation of the empirical data. In the remainder of this article, we first briefly situate the research within the literature on the Muslim agency and then we describe our ethnography and present our findings. We argue that Muslims exercise a range of unremarkable ordinary everyday agencies vis-à-vis whiteness including invisibility, challenging whiteness, and accumulating whiteness.

**MUSLIM AGENCY**

Muslims experience a wide range of Otherings. Negative attitudes toward Muslims are not necessarily derived from religion; they also incorporate ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic and other prejudices (Dunn et al. 2007; Hancock 2015; Listerborn 2015; Mondon and Winter 2017; Silva 2017; Simonsen 2018). Islamophobia, as a form of racism that shifts the prejudice from biological to cultural aspects of racism, racializes Islam, translates it as inferior, and renders (perceived) Muslims as the Other framing them as those who do not fit into white majority cultures across Muslim-minority countries (Finlay and Hopkins 2019, 2020; Itaoui 2016, 2020;
Modood 2013, 2019; Selod and Embrick 2013). The racialized Muslim Other, in this context, exercises their agency to “get on with” the prevailing regulatory social system of whiteness (Ahmed 2007) regarding what a “normal” body, that is the dominant representation of “us,” should do and look like (Bendixsen 2013). In a society where white is treated as a neutral and natural status quo, whiteness demarcates unspoken privilege and power (Berg 2012; Warren 2019). Its very existence derives from the construction of the Other. As Hall (1997) notes, the representation of Otherness holds cultural authority defining “we” as superior to “they” perpetuating dichotomies of West and East, white and non-white, secular and sacred. Whiteness, a bodily orientation (Lobo 2014), a condition for belonging (Devadoss 2020), is what the institution of power is orientated around and bodies that do not inhabit whiteness have to “accumulate” it if they want to get in (Ahmed 2002, 2007).

The racialization of Islam and the subsequent construction of the Muslim Other limit Muslims’ mobilities and violates their rights to the city. However, they are not powerless in the face of Othering; Muslims are never merely the passive object of Othering processes. They are always able to exercise their agency and respond to some degree to the subjected Othering which Modood and Thompson (2021) call “de-Othering.” Muslims employ socio-spatial practices, the ways in which they imagine where they may encounter Othering to reduce the possibilities of racial attacks in public spaces (Itaoui 2016, 2020; Itaoui and Dunn 2017). The spatialization of Islamophobia, thus, is about the relationship between visibility (which fosters Islamophobia within) and invisibility (which reduces Islamophobia by removing Muslims from) certain urban spaces. On one hand, visible signs of Islam, such as the veil or beard, subject Muslims to some potential Islamophobic attacks which reduce their mobility. On the other, such attacks and harassments in public spaces, bans against religious dress in some European countries, and the US “Muslim Ban” are attempts to reduce the visibility of Muslims in the public sphere (Gokariksel 2017; Hopkins 2019; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020). Therefore, “visibly Muslims” devise (micro-)practices of mobility and behavior to negotiate their identity and belonging (Najib and Hopkins 2019, 2020). For example, they avoid certain urban spaces at particular times (Garner and Selod 2015), do not appear in public alone (Perry 2014), or construct counter-stereotypic behaviors (Finlay and Hopkins 2019, 2020; Mythen et al. 2009). Ellefsen and Sandberg (2021) also show how Muslims’ ways of countering anti-Muslim hostility are contextual and relational; they exercise their agency in particular socio-spatial settings and response to specific acts and actors.

Regarding the visibly Muslim women, Gokariksel (2009) and Secor (2002) have conceptualized the politics of veiling. For them, veiling is a gendered embodied socio-spatial practice that touches upon the production of bodies and subjectivities. Working in Istanbul, they have analyzed multiple “regimes of veiling” that govern public space. Certain urban areas, they argue, provide the veiled women with comfort and security where it is common to see women in the veil, whereas, in some public places, they experience being out of place, looked at, anxious. Veiling, therefore, is a practice in relation to power and agency that occurs at different scales: globe, nation, urban, neighborhood, body and emotion (Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020; Secor 2002).
The veil acts as a symbol of solidarity, protest, and resistance (Bilge 2010; Chapman 2016; Vintges 2012; Warren 2019). For Mahmood (2005), however, piety and religiosity can be a source of agency and freedom by providing Muslims with a set of skills, tools, or schemas to feel corporeally protected and spiritually projected an ethical self (Rinaldo 2014). Deeb (2006) reached a similar conclusion. She stated that the agency of the “pietist” women is not necessarily emancipation as defined by Western-liberal feminist scholarship but, rather, “equity in the possibilities for practicing a pious and moral lifestyle” (Deeb 2006:218). Thinking about agency outside the dichotomy of subordination to men versus resistance to Western hegemony (Bilge 2010; Zimmerman 2015), Muslims and Islamic feminist scholars have challenged the definition of agency in Western feminist thought as coterminous with “resistance,” “subversion,” and a particular “politically prescriptive project” (Mahmood 2005:10) which precluded many Western scholars from seeing other forms of agency as learned capacity and “ability to effect change in the world and in oneself” (14) which may meaningfully shape Muslims’ lives.

Yet not every Muslim focuses on religion in the same manner and intensity. For example, Soares and Osella (2009) explored seemingly nonreligious aspects of Muslims’ everyday lives arguing that desire, leisure, fashion, and sports are agential through which Muslims challenge Islam vs. the West binary (Gokariksel and Secor 2010; Sehlikoglu 2018; Tarlo 2007a, 2007b, 2010). In this regard, O’Brien (2015) has conceptualized “religious individualism” to understand how young Muslims construct their definitions of agency within their religious identification to negotiate potential conflicts and tensions between their embodiments and the dominant cultural framework of whiteness (Driezen et al. 2021). For example, Mossièrè (2019) highlights various ways through which Muslims combine Islamic dress codes with Western styles or Tarlo (2007a:144) looks at the Islamic cosmopolitanism through “a proliferation of religiously oriented fashions in the streets of most major cosmopolitan cities in the West.”

The agency of Muslims thus has multiple manifestations and takes different shapes in different social, spatial, and temporal situations which position agentive practices within the construction and performance of identity and subjectivity in socio-spatial relations and structures of power (Al-deen 2019; Hoekstra and Verkuytten 2015). Yet how does the Muslim Other embody their everyday agency in the form of activities, identities, and socio-spatial practices? Within the context of Amsterdam, we aim to spotlight how Muslims negotiate their Otherness through embodied micro-practices focusing specifically on the spatial aspects of their presence, absence, visibility, or invisibility within everyday spaces of encounter.

**METHODOLOGY**

We ethnographically investigated how young Dutch Muslims “deal with” Othering within their urban habitat. Young Muslims are important actors in debates about the geopolitics of Islamophobia. They are growing up in a political climate where they are often seen as victim, villain, agitated who cause troubles. Being framed as susceptible to indoctrination or radicalization, media often projects racial-
ized Muslim youth as the driving force behind the security issues in Europe (Bayat and Herrera 2010). Further, they are depicted as the source of the conflicts between Islam and the West, and their occupation of space, social cohesion, integration, and identity are problematized and questioned (Hopkins et al. 2018; Itaoui 2020). Bayat and Herrera (2010) argue that the feeling of Otherness among young Muslims is strong because they are assumed as immigrant outsiders who are tolerated by the nation. El-Tayeb (2011:83) also describes how young Muslims “can be perceived as more foreign and threatening than their parents or grandparents who came to Europe from the Middle East, West Africa, or South Asia.” Consequently, the focus on young Muslims demonstrates how religious, racial, ethnic, and Othered young adults experience and negotiate the embodied aspects of anti-Muslim racism within different everyday urban spaces of encounter.

Amsterdam was selected as the ethnographic site. The city houses 350 different religious communities from 180 nationalities (Beck 2013) making it one of the most religiously diverse cities across the globe. The embodiment of Islamic religious beliefs, ritual observances, and cultural expressions is highly visible in the city. For example, 42 mosques (~15% of the total religious buildings of Amsterdam) shape the religious urban landscape and more than 120,000 Muslims (~12% of Amsterdammers) populate the city (CBS 2016; OIS 2014). As such, Amsterdam offers an interesting case for studying the ways through which young Muslims respond to their Otherness in a cosmopolitan superdiverse context.

 Undertaken between January and October 2019, this article was built on data gathered in an urban ethnography involving verbal and visual methods. Participants were approached through multiple recruitment strategies including contact with gatekeepers, networking, and snowballing. Given the diversity of Muslims in Amsterdam, they do not shape a homogeneous community. Consequently, we aimed at finding a mix of respondents from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender (eight women and 10 men), socioeconomic status (from working class to upper-middle class), occupation, education (from high school to PhD), Islamic branches (Sunni and Shia), religious involvement (from orthodoxy to liberal and cultural), age (young adults between 19 and 32), migratory generation (native, first, and second), and national origin (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Somalia, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Cameroon). Besides, because different interrelated characteristics influence how young Dutch Muslims embody their small agencies, such a collection of participants diversifies their modes of agency. Their agential practices are complicated practices that tap into different trajectories of religious prescriptions, attitudes, and personal characteristics. Consequently, based on their personality, gender, age, level of religiosity, racio-ethnic background, country of origin, educational level, social, economic, and cultural capital, marital status, and migratory generation participants employ their agency differently in different socio-spatial settings.

The study involved 34 in-depth semi-structured multi-staged interviews with 18 young Muslims. Lasting to a maximum of 180 minutes, in total 44 hours, the conducted interviews were mostly sequential, up to five sessions; five interviews were one-off. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with individuals while six inter-
views were in groups of two. Five participants (two men and three women) were either busy or because of their beliefs or discomfort did not want to be interviewed in person. Consequently, alternative data collection methods such as phone, Skype, and email interviews were employed (Dunn 2000). Walking interviews were also conducted as another verbal embodied qualitative method. Routes were all determined by participants and six (individual/group) walking interviews were recorded to understand how participants make sense of urban space. It allowed participants while showing us “their” Amsterdam and neighborhoods (Bourlessas 2018) to describe memories, histories, and imaginations which might have been forgotten during sedentary interviews (Evans and Jones 2011). Their embodied small agencies were highlighted through the analysis of their accounts and life stories regarding their everyday urban micro-practices and experiences of being different in Amsterdam.

**SMALL EMBODIED AGENCY OF THE MUSLIM OTHER IN AMSTERDAM**

Participants discussed their responses to Othering in diverse modes of practices. They were predominantly arguing that they have to negotiate their identities within, and sometimes to challenge, the dominant looks. They have developed a variety of small agentive practices or tactics of impression management (De Certeau 1984; Goffman 1959) within their everyday life. Some men shave their beard or grow a moustache, many men and women (re)adjust their clothing in different contexts, use the language differently, employ humor, clarify their religious beliefs, or ignore small Othering acts such as lengthy looks, comments, jokes, sighs, and whispers.

The examples in the remainder of this article show that when encountering such Othering processes, participants are not simply the passive victims but have developed a complex set of embodied (micro-)practices to either be more discreet and “feel” less visible, or challenge the dominant idea(l)s of whiteness by remaining visible for the “recognition of difference” (Bendixsen 2013; Fraser 2000), or project a body perceived nearer to the norms of whiteness. In this article, we have categorized young Dutch Muslims’ everyday small agencies into three types, namely invisibility, challenging whiteness, and accumulating whiteness. Related to the stigma management that Goffman (1963) defined as passing and covering, invisibility refers to a particular set of “feelings” and socio-spatial and sensorio-corporeal practices to look less Muslim, be incognito, inconspicuous, unprovoking, even social withdrawal and absence from certain public domains. Challenging whiteness points at the small agencies of rejecting Otherness through the representation of the (religious) self as an attempt to problematize whiteness as the only idea(l) of embodiment. Although our participants firmly believe that they are “normal,” by accumulating whiteness, the body is managed to be ordinary and look normal based on certain idea(l)s of whiteness thus more acceptable. Similar to De Nolf et al. (2021), we argue that these (micro-)practices are not mutually exclusive but complement each other. By classifying them, however, we contribute to a better understanding of the Othering experiences of young Dutch Muslims in Amsterdam which sheds light on how they deal with everyday anti-Muslim sentiments.
Invisibility: “I Just Don’t Want People to Immediately Notice Me.”

Otherness is about socio-corporeal distance and awayness from what is considered normal by the dominant group. The Muslim Other is perceived to be far away from the dominant norms of white Dutch society, ontologically, corporeally, and socially. Learned through their everyday life and heard stories, some participants embody their agency by managing the Othering features, or as Goffman (1959) notes, “sign vehicles.” For Goffman (1963), these practices are about proactively avoiding Othering and adapting behaviors that make the stigma less visible thus diminishing social tension rather than challenging exerted hostility (Ellefsen and Sandberg 2021). Some participants reported their engagement in the micro-practices of defensive withdrawal or practices of “invisibilization” to avoid harm, racialized surveillance, and material threat (Hopkins 2014; Hopkins and Smith 2008).

The most repeated example is related to clothing practices. Yusuf, from the second generation of Muslims in the Netherlands, a religious man, in his mid-20s, is a bearded highly educated newly married man who is working for an international consultancy firm. During the phone interviews, he said how he avoids the Othering gaze:

I think a couple of times on the train while having my qamis [the ankle-length garments for men] on I wrap it up and put it in my trousers so people don’t see I’m wearing qamis. I just kind of cover it because you don’t have to gather a lot of attention.

By hiding his qamis which would immediately identify him as a Muslim, Yusuf engages in the practice of being less visibly Muslim. Remembering once on the train someone “was shouting like it is because of you [that] the world is in this madness . . . you Muslims, you, ruined the world,” he has learned that there is a relationship between the visibility of Muslims and indolence toward them. Yusuf’s experience reflects the ways that social anxieties are mapped onto the spatial presence of Muslims where the locality, public transport in this case, and globalism of Islamophobia are entwined. Yusuf’s experience also mirrors the studies of Daneshpour and Dadras (2018) and Zahedi (2011) in the United States where they have argued that the visibility of Muslims in the urban sphere leads to more conflicts and intolerant attitudes. Therefore, to prevent conflict, young Muslims sometimes aim to become less visible through the management of the visible markers of Muslimness. Othering predominantly happens through the visual (Shaker 2021; Shaker et al. 2021; Shaker et al. forthcoming a); to respond some Muslims tend to restrict the amount, or share a particular kind, of information from getting to mainstream society as an attempt to avoid any problems. Fatima, in her early 20s, the second generation of Muslims in the Netherlands, is a university student, a teacher at a high school, who dons the hijab. At the fourth round of a group interview, she argued that:

I don’t care if people see me but [I] try not to stand out. I used to wear very bright colours but I don’t do that anymore because the feeling of standing out mixes with the fear that is always there because you are a Muslim and you are a minority. I just don’t want people to immediately notice me.

“Visibly Muslims” (Tarlo 2010), particularly women, concern about their everyday securities and exposure to Islamophobia which lead them to constantly negotiate
or change their identity by clothing differently (Dwyer 2008; Najib and Hopkins 2019; Siraj 2011). Through readjusting her clothing practices, not wearing colorful hijab/abayas, Fatima “feels” that she would not stand out as a highly visible Muslim woman. She argued that in comparison with “typical” dark abayas, a colorful hijab draws more looks making her more noticeable thus more susceptible to Othering practices. She wants to remain in-/less visible. Her account suggests that it is the recognizability of such Othered bodies within the public space that brings the fear of Islamophobia to the fore. Similar to hooks (2008), Fatima’s fear and unease derive from moving through white-dominated urban spaces saturated with the white (male) Othering gaze. Although she is still recognizable as a Muslim woman, by the micro-practice of invisibility and managing her appearance, Fatima would “feel” safer thus can go un-/less-noticed. These clothing practices, consequently, are about the freedom tied to invisibility which enables them to pass as unremarkable or unprovoking individuals. Passing, therefore, as the process of identity concealment (Hitch 1983) or creation of alternative narratives (Joyce 2018) functions as a micro socio-spatial practice related to a particular type of body whose difference is unmarked (Ahmed 2004).

Passing and the spatiality of invisibility changes the everyday activities of participants such as shopping, recreational activities, eating out, or other mundane practices. For instance, Sumayyah, who is the second generation of Dutch Muslims, in early 20s, a university student and a martial art coach for children who wears the hijab, implied that she felt invisibility has a spatial dimension:

> When I have to choose between two places where to go shopping or whatever, I normally just go to the places I know, okay, in that place I would feel comfortable because there are people that look like me or at least there are people that understand why I look like this.

Sumayyah’s narrative refers to the socio-spatial practices of invisibility, the management of the visual representation of her faith within, and avoiding from certain spaces where she does not stand out or draw attention, where she feels safe, familiar, and welcome such as her neighborhood shops or community/ethnic restaurants and cafés. Related to different “regimes of veiling” (Gokariksel 2009; Secor 2002), Sumayyah felt spatial invisibility practice echoes what Itaoui (2016) calls spatial imaginaries or mental maps of Islamophobia. There is a spatial distribution of Othering across Amsterdam; areas with the low levels of Muslim population, or the majority of white people, are reported with a higher number of Othering experiences. Sumayyah’s story in Amsterdam is in line with conducted studies in Paris (Hancock and Mobillion 2019; Najib and Hopkins 2019), Malmö (Listerborn 2015), Sydney (Itaoui 2016), and San Francisco (Itaoui 2020). Urban areas or neighborhoods with the greater presence of Muslim communities provide a stronger sense of acceptance and lower levels of Othering.

An invisibility practice regarding the language came to the fore in a walking interview with Fouad and Ahmad. As the second generation of Dutch Muslims, Fouad is a working man in his mid-20s, and his close friend Ahmad is a young working Muslim man in his early 20s. They explained how they employ different language, accent, and words outside their neighborhood to pass:
Fouad: it’s like I’ve got to act like I’ve got to be someone else but not like super nice but like the words you use, accent.

Ahmad: it’s not a different language; it’s the same language but the use of words is very different.

Ahmad and Fouad’s story demonstrates what Devadoss (2020) calls “sounding brown,” the auditory Othering influenced by their specific Dutch accent, a stigmatizing feature immediately noticeable (Shaker et al. 2021). Here, the felt invisibility refers to inaudibility; by talking differently they have the advantage of passing without bringing attention to themselves. By “code-switching” (Warren 2019), adjusting speech and self-presentation, Ahmad and Fouad feel they can pass. Invisibility has both corporeal (Shaker et al. forthcoming b) and sensorial (Shaker et al. 2021) dimensions. However, the interesting aspect of this practice is related to its spatiality. Ahmad and Fouad have to speak Dutch differently outside their not majority-white neighborhood to negotiate the Otherness in white-dominated urban spaces. Such a spatial understanding of Othering touches not only upon “us” vs. “them” but also “here” vs. “there” (Hancock 2015; Najib and Teeple Hopkins 2020). Othering operates in space by spatially assigning who is in/out of place and who belongs in the where of the city.

The spatiality of Othering, therefore, influences how Muslims use the city. For example, a majority of participants, both men and women, explained that they do not frequent the center of Amsterdam because they feel uneasy judgmental looks. Discussing his everyday life, Hafez, a religious man of the first generation of Dutch Muslims and a bearded working man in his early 30s, mentioned the use of the Internet as a way to avoid the center of Amsterdam:

I go there very early morning to, for example, do the shopping. I do it very quickly and you see fewer people. But the best thing is the Internet; you can buy from the Internet everything you want.

Browne (2015) in “Dark Matters” argues how the black bodies in the public sphere are subject to surveillance. Similarly, participants were arguing that their bodies are spectacularly visible within the everyday white gaze on the street. Therefore, they try to remain invisible because the ability to go unnoticed may minimize or remove the consequences of Othering. As part of the spatial negotiation of their visibility, some interviewees mentioned the use of the Internet and e-shopping to curtail the possibility of being discriminated against. Although the literature has mostly focused on the veiled Muslim women, Hafez’s story indicates that Othering also limits the mobility of visibly Muslim men and pushes them into more private spaces. Such invisibility practices also show that there are clear geographical tensions across Amsterdam particularly between its center, well-off white-dominated areas, and periphery, migrant neighborhoods. Sent into the “symbolic exile” (Hall 1997), the spatial practices of Muslims are limited mostly within the intimate everyday geographies of their neighborhood, projecting a sense of spatial confinement (Hancock and Mobillion 2019; Najib and Hopkins 2019). Simply put, this spatial distance replicates the social distance. The spatial organization of invisibility defines space as a set of power relations about certain types of bodies that should be visible and who should be rendered invisible. The question of the “right place” for the “right body”
makes Muslims’ invisibility practices part and parcel of their everyday micro-politics of public places.

Challenging Whiteness: “Unknown Makes Unloved!”

In contrast to the invisibility which derives from the feeling of insecurity in some specific urban spaces, some participants argued that being visible despite the Othering and discriminatory acts can be a form of agency. An argument frequently given by the interviewees accentuates the desire to express and display publicly their Muslimness in line with piety and modesty (Bilge 2010; Mahmood 2005). Nour, in mid-20s, is a working/studying visibly Muslim woman from the second Dutch Muslim generation. She stated that Othering encounters have made her stronger to “go visible” and reaffirm her Muslimness: “I won’t hide my identity and this is who I am.” Here modesty and the embodied representation of the Islamic beliefs not only brings Nour spiritual fulfillment but also the strength to refuse and resist white Othering attached to her body. Going visible also brings protection to some participants. Myriam, in mid-20s, the first generation of Dutch Muslims, is a peer-educator and wears the hijab. She explained that she was not wearing the hijab before to be invisible but after donning the hijab:

It is also interesting to see how people react to you because they don’t know that you’re wearing it [hijab]. You start analysing their behaviour and focus on how they interact with you. I did not notice a lot of changes but I noticed that men were more respecting me compared to who I was before. When someone comes to you, they want to get to know you; they don’t want to get into your pants.

Myriam’s story echoes Mahmood’s arguments in Politics of Piety (2005) when she argues that becoming religious is agentive and veiling is a transformative technique of the self (also Bilge 2010). Similarly, analyzing the interactive aspect of the veil in London, Tarlo (2007b:132) argues that “for many women, the adoption of the hijab transforms not only their sense of self but also their relationship to others and the wider environment.” Comparing with her previous clothing practices, Myriam described how wearing the headscarf, being a visibly Muslim woman, has provided her with an increased sense of safety and protection from urban harassment (Secor 2002). Veiling for her is a protective screen against the objectification of her body.

Some veiled participants, furthermore, shared arguments regarding being an “explainer” (Harris and Hussein 2020) to challenge the dominant norms of whiteness by educating/challenging a specific person directly or initiating interaction with that individual and explaining why they don the hijab (Ellefsen and Sandberg 2021). As a form of “managing” multicultural (Othering) encounters, they occasionally engage with and educate others about their faith as an attempt to “make themselves more understood” (Hopkins 2014:1582). Yet, considering the magnitude of time and effort that some of the young Dutch Muslims put into practice in relation to the white Othering gaze, some participants argued that they are careful when, where, and with whom to spend their energy without wearing out. Rejecting her practice of veiling as a symbol of oppression but a conscious personal choice in her everyday (religious) life, Sara, a working/studying visibly Muslim woman in her mid-20s from the second
Dutch Muslim generation, explained how she challenges the idea(l)s of white embodiment:

For example, I would walk around and overhear people talking 'ah, that poor thing, she has to wear that.' I have two choices: either ignore it and move on with my life or step in and say what’s your problem? I chose to wear this and not everyone is forced to wear the hijab. This has also happened a couple of times. It depends on my mood and sometimes I strike up a conversation like it’s not suppression; actually, it’s supposed to protect me and, compared to my friends, I feel like it does protect me.

Sara’s account highlights the emergence of an assertive young Muslim (woman). Challenging the dominant norms of whiteness has been mainly employed by young Muslim women (first, second, or native generations) with a high level of human capital who have the confidence and knowledge to confront the anti-Muslim comments and acts. This finding is comparable with Hancock and Mobillion’s (2019) study on the agency of Muslim women in Paris. They have argued that in contrast to their former generations, young Muslim women tend not to be apologetic but more assertive who expect equality and fair treatment from their fellow citizens. Talking back, therefore, is more than simply using one’s voice; participants would be using it to make themselves heard in a way that “challenges politics of domination” (hooks 1989:8; also Ellefsen and Sandberg 2021).

Sara argued that although the personal is political and veiling has been both widely politicized and read as a sign of oppression or resistance, the veil reflects a personal preference, an individual choice. There are, however, arguments against the headscarf in the United States, Europe, and Australia among feminists who cannot imagine choice and the veil in the same sentence. For many Western feminists, personhood is defined narrowly as the unencumbered, autonomous, self (Scott 2007:125–129). They fail to see that personhood may be experienced in wholly different, yet nevertheless enriching ways (Ahmed 2011; Mahmood 2005). Many interviewed women affirmed agency and personal choice for veiling, in some occasions even against their family’s wishes, in a context of ambient skepticism that is often endorsed by Western feminism (Zimmerman 2015). However, their voices were silenced and dismissed as irrelevant because, for many feminists, the headscarf only symbolizes oppression pointing at the limited imagination of liberal thoughts to understand different ways of being and doing things.

Another repeated agential practice was the embodied act of “getting yourself out,” “give them your face” to “let people see you” for the “recognition of difference” (Fraser 2000). Almost all of the interviewees argued that their increased visibility in Dutch society would transfer their perceived “deviant” embodiments everyday which in return may promote reconsideration of Othering attitudes and, if not acceptance at least, tolerance. Hafez, for example, articulated his interpersonal approach toward de-Othering:

At first I was like why are they looking at me? Did I do something wrong? But you will get used to it. I have taught myself to go to that person and greet them and have a chitchat with them. Because something has to get faced to be understood ... I’m trying to give them my face: hey they can talk, they have teeth, they can laugh, they are friendly, and they are not like what we get from news and media.
Hafez suggested that urban space and everyday encounter with different groups of people have the potential to (re)humanize Muslims and break down prejudices and negative views which would lead toward positive attitudes to each other because, for him, contact with difference enhances knowledge. Working on the self-representations of American Muslims, Mansson McGinty (2012) has also argued that challenging the dominant whiteness through going visible, as a response to the problematization of Muslimness, is part of the identity politics to negotiate and perform politics of belonging and inclusion. As “ambassadors of Islam” (Listerborn 2015; Van Es 2019), participants challenge both what the normal body is and the stereotypes and misconceptions propagated about the Muslim Other. For them, this approach lessens the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety of the white Dutch around them and creates appreciation and empathy. Comparing Amsterdam with a Dutch village where she grew up, Fatima felt that she can pursue a better life because people are used to the exposure to difference:

I think diversity affects people because when I started wearing longer abayas even non-Muslims here reacted like you’re wearing longer clothes now and it looks good on you. Diversity has an effect on non-Muslims because this becomes normal for them to see such things and if they never see it, in Dutch we say onbekend maakt onbemind [unknown makes unloved]! That’s the same with seeing diversity; if you don’t see it, you hate it; you say no, this is the culture that has to be. But if you see it, you become more used to it and you are more likely to accept it.

Challenging the idea(l)s of white embodiment via visibility and explaining are ways through which young participants actively negotiate their access to everyday urban spaces. By demonstrating approachability and affability participants make their embodiments public through demonstrating their rights and recognition (Hatziprokopiou and Evergeti 2014). Going visible is, therefore, a spatial practice. The public sphere is a potential space of insecurity and vulnerability which some participants try to avoid. However, by reclaiming their presence in the public sphere and reorientating themselves into more public and visible spaces, some of the participants challenge the spatial marginalization of Muslims who are perceived to be living detached from and in parallel with Dutch society (Finlay and Hopkins 2019, 2020). Through the spatial practices of being visibly engaged in everyday public life, some participants use everyday urban spaces of encounters to show that they are engaged in Dutch society to secure belonging and have their citizenship recognized in the face of often racist and exclusionary conditions.

Accumulating Whiteness: “I’m a Grayish Kind of Muslim.”

Participants desired to show that they are indeed “normal.” In doing so, as an attempt to undermine the white Othering gaze, “carefully managing multicultural intimacies rather than simply withdrawing from public life” (Hopkins 2014:1577), some participants were engaged in a process of negotiation between piety and pleasure, religion and secularism, traditional and Western norms of doing things to be “ordinary” to look “normal” based on some certain white idea(l)s. If the body is a construct, it can be reconstructed. Forging a middle-class lifestyle, constructing
oneself as an ordinary person, and insisting that one is not remotely different are practices of de-Othering. For instance, Myriam described that:

I don’t wear too long clothes to be more sophisticated and Western and [when] they ask what I like to do, I’d say I like to go to concerts and I’d like to travel, you know, the things that make me more Western in their eyes which is also very normal in our culture as well. I feel because they don’t know about our culture, I have to educate them and emphasise not on differences but similarities you share.

Similar to Myriam’s account, the following observation from the fieldwork is an illustrative example of an assortment of everyday embodied agential performances that cross the boundaries between secular and sacred in multicultural urban spaces of encounter:

There are many instances that young Muslims project an outwardly acceptable image of themselves. They seem to challenge the stereotypical image of the Muslim Other. They have person-alised the religion and embodied it through a wide host of Western idea(l)s of beauty and fashion. There are many examples of women wearing a turban and a blouse and (ripped) skinny jeans with raggedy jackets. Stylish clothing and carefully selected colour-coded accessories and jewellery are some of the other examples of how young Muslims attempt to be cool, fashion-able, normal. Through a variety of everyday practices of the beautification of the look, they appear to project proximity and similarity instead of distance and difference. (Fieldnote, Monday, 2nd September 2019, Amsterdam)

Many young Muslims have grown up wearing “Western-style” clothing, to which they later may add Islamic elements such as the veil. This hybrid style may reflect increased religiosity, a response to Islamophobia, and/or a desire to reflect their identity through their visual presentation. Similar to Myriam, some observed/interviewed young Muslims tend to express a particular image of themselves detached from the stereotypes to challenge the idea of what Muslims (ought to) look like. Their carefully thought of and assembled body images derive from their faith to not only look pious and modest but also “look right” to be more “presentable” based on the Western style of whiteness. Fashionable, slim, sporty, muscular, built, or crafted bodies related to the Western consumer culture are everyday (micro-) practices of normalization to “blend in.” As Gokariksel (2009) reflects, the religious and the secular are not the opposite but intersect in complex ways. Through the privatization and individualization of religion, we witness an eclectic and bricolage of religious beliefs and practices (Driezen et al. 2021). By interpreting modesty based on their personal read of the religious texts as well as concepts of beauty, femininity, masculinity, social class, and invested sociocultural capital, some of the observed/interviewed young Dutch Muslims demonstrate a new approach to the self, society, and religion (Gokariksel 2009; Gokariksel and Secor 2010; Mossière 2019; Secor 2002; Tarlo 2007a, 2007b, 2010). In a similar vein, Lisa argued that she is “not black and white but a grayish kind of Muslim”:

I have now managed to find an in-between way of being a Muslim I want to be in my clothing and being the person I want to be. For example, today I’m wearing pants but I’m wearing a blouse which is almost to my knees when I stand up; that’s enough for me … the first time I had an interview for a management position, I didn’t wear my headscarf but put it back to make it Western. I thought I should make myself look like that. I was thinking maybe they have certain presumptions about headscarf and I wanted to take them away.
Being “a grayish kind of Muslim,” that is combining Islamic and Western cultural elements, puts Lisa in an in-between phase; she is visible because she is different, she is a veiled Muslim woman, yet she is, to some extent, invisible since her embodiment is, partly, “Western” making her detached from the “typical” image of Muslim women. There are diverse interpretations of veiling translated and manifested by different types of dress and headgear regarding varying social status, economic conditions, religious involvement, and cultural capital. In other words, we are witnessing a spectrum of the “religious” and “cultural” veil. Therefore, the hijab in Amsterdam and many other Western metropolises, as Leila Ahmed (2011) argues, has become more of a fashion, colorful, ornate, and glitzy which is not always necessarily related to modesty or exhaustive concealment of body contours.

Lisa, moreover, negotiates her identity with her future employers and creatively adapts her clothing following the professional setting of the job interview. Simply put, to gain a more favorable social position, she modifies her appearance and behavior to be more presentable, acceptable, and employable. In their studies on the veiled Muslim women’s agency in Paris, Najib and Hopkins (2019) highlight that the more stereotypically covered, the less possibility for the veiled Muslim women to find a job. Therefore, related to different “regimes of veiling” (Gokariksel 2009; Secor 2002), Muslim women wear Western-style clothing and apply different styles of the hijab across the city to find a job, visit a new apartment, or complete administrative paperwork in public institutions (Hancock and Mobillion 2019; Najib and Hopkins 2019). In other words, those perceived socioculturally closer to the white idea(l)s experience less Othering. Therefore, educated and upwardly mobile veiled women with high levels of human capital (Warren 2019) assimilate normative values of whiteness to distance and reject the negative stereotypes attached to their bodies and embodiments.

Projecting whiteness, however, is not limited to veiled women. Yusuf exemplified his proximity to a particular image of whiteness:

“Yusuf: I think I’ve been lucky to be born at the right time. I think if I would have been born in the late 90s or early 2000s, people wouldn’t like the beard. Right when I was going to grow the beard, the hipster movement started. People rarely notice and I have never felt people staring [at me]. I think it’s also because I let my moustache grow because it doesn’t look that Muslim.

Interviewer: people think you’re a hipster

Yusuf: yes also because I wear sneaker stuff [referring to his urban outfit style], people think I’m a hipster.”

Employing individual agency and creativity based on his urban style of living and fashion, working, studying, and sports activities, Yusuf suggests that he conforms bodily to certain standards of white, middle-class comportment (Ahmed 2017). It is this proximity to whiteness that allows him for a certain ability to pass, to remove his Otherness. The embodied whiteness and the material consequences of such embodiment position Yusuf in a liminal situation; his perceived hipsterness while sending his Otherness to the background brings his accumulated whiteness to the fore turning him into a visible-invisible Muslim man.
For Shelina Janmohamed (2016), Myriam, Lisa, Yusuf, and many other young Muslims in the Netherlands and the Global North are Generation M-ers. In her book “Generation M,” she theorizes about a new generation of Muslim millennials who are determined to be heard and seen. Generation M uses white consumption as a tool for empowerment not only to express its identity but also to expand and experience it in novel ways detached from the potential political issues in non-Muslim countries. Relatedly, similar to Dwyer et al.’s (2008) research on young Muslim men in the United Kingdom, socioeconomic background and human capital play a significant role. It is critical to understand that the young Muslim (men and women) projecting whiteness in this part of the article are from middle-class backgrounds. Class status alongside cultural, social, and political aspects, as well as educational status, are key intersecting factors in accumulating and projecting whiteness thus determining the life trajectories of young Muslims in the growing Islamophobic context.

Through small complex agential practices, identity negotiation, and new embodiments of religiosity, some young Dutch middle-class Muslims are forging a lifestyle that somewhat bridges the secular vs. sacred dichotomy. As part of their multilayered intersectional identities, next to their religion, by emphasizing normalcy and practices of consumption, joy, and pleasure they challenge Islam vs. the West binary. This is related to the question of agency and subjectivity of those contemporary “transitionary” Muslims (Sunier 2016) who focus on ordinary everyday life, desire, leisure, and sports which enable them to move with more confidence through everyday interpersonal urban spaces of encounter.

CONCLUSION

Living in the city requires a range of (micro-)practices for managing the impression, movement, and communication of the body to deal with multiple encounters. Everyday life is a fruitful rubric for examining the embodiment of agency. Focusing on the Muslim Other in Amsterdam, we have articulated how their everyday agency can be understood as a set of small, bodily practices by which they respond to the Otherness attached to their bodies to minimize the risk of standing out to freely pass, to struggle for the recognition of difference through challenging the dominant norms of normal white embodiment by emphasizing their pious presence in public space, or to project an alternative embodiment. We put the Dutch case into conversation with the growing literature on Islamophobia, the Muslim agency, and the urban Muslim communities in other Muslim-minority countries. By doing so, we have shown the complex ways through which some young Dutch Muslims embody their agency to decrease or increase their visibility within everyday urban spaces of encounter as well as positioning themselves differently in different spatialities within the spectrum of the proximity and distance to the dominant norms of whiteness to negotiate the mechanisms through which the body transforms from a site of conflict into one of reconciliation.

The study of the embodied agency of the Othered populations, additionally, touches upon the right to the city. Embodiment foregrounds the materialization of this right since the performative aspects of the right to the city come into being.
through the corporeal occupation of urban space. This is what Butler (2015) calls the “right to appear”; it is a right to be visible which needs to be spatially lived, affirmed, and embodied. Accordingly, Othering encounters and anti-Muslim racism are socio-spatially produced which demonstrate a specific right to the city for Muslims. On one hand, going invisible confines the right to the city hinting at the internalization of the discriminatory acts that Muslims encounter. On the other, Muslims’ everyday struggle over visibility within the growing populist xenophobic climate not only links personal troubles to structures of power and discrimination but also the violation of their right to appear and the right to the city. In this sense, the very practice of going (in)visible/white is a performative act of agency because Muslims are not trying to dominate the public space but to challenge, shift, and/or expand the normative standards of who is culturally capable of sustaining a common representation of the body.

REFERENCES


