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Lost in Translation: The Male Gaze and The (In)visible Bodies of Muslim Women—A Response Article

By Ewa Glapka¹

Abstract

This article explores women's relationship with the patriarchal surveillance of their bodies—'the male gaze'. Going beyond the scholarly tradition of solely critiquing the patriarchal discourse of the female body, the study examines the processes in which individuals relate to the male gaze by means of socio-culturally available meaning-making resources. The analysis is based on interviews with Muslim women in South Africa who talk about their hijab practices and thus position themselves to the patriarchal discourses of Islam and West. The article advances a theoretical and analytical framework in which concepts of 'hybridity' and 'difference' are harnessed to examine the possibilities of subverting patriarchal surveillance on the level of individual discourse practices. The study's findings demonstrate the importance of exploring the contextual and reflexive mechanisms regulating the gendered relations of looking.

Keywords: hijab/veiling, female body, patriarchy

Introduction

One of the major implications of patriarchy has been its control of feminine corporeality. The male gaze shapes both women's bodies and their subjectivities through a plethora of practices and relations that span different historical, geographical and socio-cultural contexts. This article focuses on the implications of the gaze for South African Muslim women committed to hijab. In the analysis of interviews in which individuals talk about their commitment to veiling, I examine the ways in which hijab is related not only with the patriarchal culture of Islam but also with the Western male gaze. The article demonstrates a conceptual and analytical framework of investigating the male gaze as discursive and lived, contextually specific and reflexive. Specifically, while the study, like most feminist research, regards the male gaze as a socio-cultural construct, it does not focus on the patriarchal representations of the female body. Addressing scarcity of similar approaches, it explores the micro level of discursive practices through which the male gaze is (re)constructed—reproduced and/or revoked by women who live it. Also, presenting accounts of veiling in the context of multicultural, post-apartheid South Africa, this analysis contributes to research on hijab, which has been dominated by studies in the contexts of Western-hegemonic and majority Muslim societies.

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Male Gaze

Proposed by Mulvey (1988) with reference to the depictions of female characters in Hollywood cinema, the ‘male gaze’ denotes patterns in visual representation in which female characters are objectified or annihilated by male protagonists. In feminist literature, the notion has been used as a general metaphor describing the culturally predominant visual discourses which portray the world from a primarily male perspective (Kaplan, 1996, Walters, 1995). The discourses are notorious in feminist writing for communicating women’s (physical and symbolic) inferiority, commending the female body that is appealing to the heterosexual man and de-valoring the bodies that fail to do so. Tracing the power of the gaze in the cult of thinness, fitness and beauty, Ponterotto (2016) finds what she calls ‘normalized corporeity’ defined by the androcentric conceptions of gender, sexuality and beauty (pp. 136-139). These conceptions are embodied by the ‘normate’ (Garland Thomson, 2004), i.e. the ageless (young), thin, sexually appealing, athletic and abled-bodied subject (Ponterotto, 2016, p. 135). Nonetheless, the power of the gaze, Ponterotto argues, could be overcome if bodies were thought and perceived through the lens which she presents. Below, I discuss the noteworthy insights and gaps in Ponterotto’s discussion and next apply the former in the analysis of individuals’ relationship with the male gaze. Doing so, in the study I seek to underscore the necessity of taking due care to interrogate the empirical and lived relevance of the theoretical solutions that we, feminist and gender scholars, proffer.

Against ‘normalized corporeity’

One of the empowering responses to aesthetic oppression is, following Ponterotto, moving away from strict gender binaries (2016, pp. 144-145). Indeed, unsettling the fine androcentric distinctions between masculinity and femininity might loosen the rigidity of the ‘normalized corporeity’. Still, I posit, it cannot be assumed that the easing of the traditional gender dichotomy will automatically eradicate the aesthetic power of the male gaze. For example, despite the emergence of fitness culture and its valorization of athletic rather than skinny female bodies, it is lean rather than bulky athletes that are presented as the accepted ‘ideal’ of the athletic female body (Krane et al., 2004). The fact that athletic femininity still means negotiating between muscularity and traditional female (hetero)sexual appeal (Meân and Kassing, 2008) suggests that the disciplinary power of the male gaze prevails even in the contexts where the patriarchal conception of heterosexual femininity is being challenged.

Another notion with which Ponterotto counters what she calls ‘normalized corporeity’ is Haraway’s figure of the cyborg (1991). As “the hybridized posthuman form” (Ponterotto, 2016, p. 146), the cyborg is “a metaphor leaving the way open for a new non-Western, non-patriarchal discourse” (ibid.). Yet, I propose, as the embodiment of an ever-diminishing dividing line between the organism and machine, cyborgs may both challenge and reproduce the dominant aesthetic surveillance—the reproduction can be exemplified by the ageless body attained by means of surgery, cosmetics and pharmacology (Balsamo, 1996).

A related and the most interesting idea proposed by Ponterotto is the ‘hybrid body’ (2016, p.146). In line with Bhabha (1988), Ponterotto sees hybridity as “not just the process of combining two entities but rather a channel of negotiation between, or outside of, the boundaries and binaries that frame identities and cultures” (2016, p. 146). The hegemony of androcentric bodies is challenged, for example, by transsexual bodies through the departures that they take from the essentialist binaries structuring ‘normated corporeity’. Consequently, observing importance of “the commitment to the principle of difference” (2016, p. 134), Ponterotto argues in favor of a

“new [feminist] definition of the body... rotating around the concepts of plurality, difference and hybridity... [that provides] a forceful discursive tool for resistance to ideologically induced manipulation of the female body” (p. 142).

Nonetheless, there are certain problems in how Ponterotto elaborates on her ideas. The binary logic (“male/non-male, white/nonwhite, heterosexual/non-heterosexual, middle class/non-middle class”) (p. 134) disrupted by the ‘hybrid body’ is identified as typical of Western patriarchal beauty discourse. Yet, while patriarchy and West seem reasonably self-evident concepts, “a new non-Western, non-patriarchal discourse” (p. 146) which Ponterotto invokes as response to the hegemonic male gaze is, I suggest, less so. The discourse seems particularly perplexing considering that some of the existing non-Western discourses seem no less patriarchal than that of West. Here, I propose that Ponterotto gets away with this elision because her concepts, though insightful, remain in the realm of theoretical discussion.

In what follows, I demonstrate that solely invoking (rather than examining) a “new non-Western, non-patriarchal discourse” as an avenue for less normative aesthetic of the female body is problematic. Even if a new discourse emergent from difference and hybridity challenges Western patriarchy, can we assume that its conception of the female body and beauty will not be subjected to any norms, even though it differs from the Western ‘normalized corporeity’? Will not be the male gaze salient still, albeit in different ways? By not addressing this, Ponterotto seems to be taking for granted results of the discursive process behind hybridization, i.e. translation. It is through translation that one arrives at the “hybrid sites of meaning” (Bhabba 1994, p. 234) which allow “[cutting] across binaries” (Pym, 2010, p. 140) and establishing an inherently intermediary position of “neither the one nor the Other” (Bhabba 1994, p. 10). While Ponterotto does not explicitly mention the process, here I argue that it should not be neglected—for the very reason of its outcomes.

To illustrate the perplexity of translation with a specific reference to aesthetics, Tate (2005, 2009) finds what she refers to as ‘Black beauty’ inherently hybrid—related but not identical with either Black or white normative aesthetics. Yet, in the emergent translations of ‘Black beauty’, Tate also notes “the simultaneity of the ‘same’ and ‘different’” (2009, p. 153) (in relation to the Black and the white femininities). Continuously referring to the two essentialist discourses, the Black feminine identifications reveal the “persistence of essentialism” (2005, p. 7) in the production of difference. For example, in the aesthetics of black African hair, a Black woman who weaves her naturally coarse hair with, say, the hair of a Brazilian woman hybridizes the Western and non-Western beauty in that she embodies neither the essentialist Black, nor the essentialist Latino femininity. However, despite its subversive relationship with the Western and Non-Western beauty norms, the hybrid embodiment cannot escape, all the more supplant, the normative implications of the two aesthetics. For instance, although the (technologically aided) attainment of silky and long hair can be (and often is) construed as embodying one’s agency (Nyamnjoh and Fuh, 2014), in the way Ponterotto seems to envisage the cyborg to work, from the perspective of the black anti-racist aesthetics, it is deemed as self-oppressive and enacting fraud aesthetics of white culture (Taylor, 1999). This, I argue, compels the question whether similar entanglements of translation can foreclose what Ponterotto envisages as revoking the male gaze through hybridization and difference.

Finally, regarding resistance to the male gaze as inherently transgressive, Ponterotto neither explains nor examines how transgression should be(come) subjectively relevant to heterosexual women. However, for them, I propose, due to the very emphasis on transgression, Ponterotto’s conception of ‘resisting the male gaze’ may be difficult. The challenge is manifest, for example,

in how the (thoroughly heterosexual) postfeminist culture has used the female body to articulate its resistance to patriarchal control. The emphatically female-heterosexual gestures of postfeminist self-empowerment have been critiqued by feminists as reproducing the “increasingly normalized hypersexualized and pornified discourses” (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 12), which equate women’s agency with a skillful display of one’s sexuality (Macdonald, 2006, p. 12). Here I suggest that the postfeminist subject’s resistance to patriarchy eventually reproduces it because of her strong identification with ‘normalized corporeity’ and disinclination to transgress. These cannot be underestimated as regards all heterosexual women, irrespectively of whether they espouse postfeminist or feminist ideas.

Therefore, I suggest, it is particularly important to investigate the emancipating potential of hybridization with reference to heterosexual femininity. It is also vital that it is not solely the ‘non-binarized body’ (Ponterotto 2016, p. 134) that is examined but first and foremost the hybrid subjectivity which it embodies. As stated, in this article, women’s relationship with the male gaze is examined on the basis of interviews with heterosexual Muslim women. The discussion focuses on Muslim women because, firstly, like the body’s hyper-visibility in Western culture, veiling of the body in Islam is also, in its own ways, underwritten by patriarchy. Secondly, living in the mainstream-Western society, the women are also exposed to its own patriarchal surveillance, for example via the media imagery of the ‘normalized corporeity’. Familiar with two, Western and non-Western, discourses of the female body, the women are well-positioned to construct their bodies through ‘(commitment to) difference’ and hybridity. The question pursued in this study is whether in these constructions, difference and hybridity work in the ways envisaged by Ponterotto (2016, p. 142), i.e. if they render a “forceful discursive tool for resistance” against the male gaze.

Hijab

The current analysis works with a narrow understanding of hijab as the attire expected of women in Islam². Neglecting the ‘spatial’ and ‘ethical’ hijab (Mernissi, 1991), I hereby explore how the ‘visual’ hijab is made sense of by individuals committed to veiling, to consequently present the subjective ramifications of the patriarchal surveillance underlying hijab discourse (Hamzeh, 2011).

Although meanings ascribed to the veil differ across disparate geographical, socio-cultural and socio-political contexts, the universally shared understanding is that hijab covers, hides and protects (Lane, 1984), and that it is a form of enacting corporal piety and modesty (Gökarıksel, 2009, p. 660). As such, veiling signifies respect and moral authority, as well as “honor, virtue, femininity, and social class” (ibid., see also Jackson and Monk-Turner, 2015, pp. 31-32). In Western culture, where visibility is the privileged form of knowing (Zelizer, 2001, p. 1) and is equated with freedom (Scott, 2007), hijab is treated as a sign of patriarchal suppression (Alloula, 1986), both by feminists and postfeminists. Importantly for the current discussion, the cloaked figure of a Muslim woman is also problematically related with the Western patriarchy. Stripped of the traditional attributes of heterosexual female beauty, the veiled woman represents the opposite of the ‘normate’, whose identity is largely premised on her heterosexual attractiveness.

Clearly, the degree to which the bodies of ‘normates’ are exposed in the Western culture and the emphasis on veiling specifically the female body in Islam imply that apart from dictating how the body should look when it is visible to the male heterosexual spectator, the male gaze

²In South Africa, hijab usually means a headscarf and either an abaya (a cloak) or a loose-fitting clothing, neither of which exposes anything else but hands and face.

regulates the extent of the body's visibility. With this in mind, below, I examine the analytical purchase of the theoretical concepts of hybridity and difference by investigating how Muslim women negotiate their subjectivities within the precincts of the two patriarchal discourses that prescribe gendered codes of body visibility.

The study

Data collection

Data presented in the article come from a qualitative, descriptive study of women's subjective experiences of the body and beauty in the socio-culturally heterogeneous context of South Africa. Although the group becomes increasingly inclusive (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005), young women remain the most typical addressees of the cultural incentives to adhere to specific beauty standards (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Projansky, 2014). Therefore, this study recruited its participants among women whose ages ranged from 19 to 25 years of age. A convenience sample of 50 participants was recruited among university students, where I work as a researcher.

The women identified themselves as black African (13), colored (15), Indian (16) and white (11). Recruited through a purposeful snowball sampling, the interviewees identified themselves as middle-class and (with the exceptions of three bisexual and one homosexual interviewees) as heterosexual. Fourteen of the participants identified themselves as Muslim (three colored and eleven Indian), of whom five wear abayas and headscarves permanently, three – only headscarves. Four said they were transitioning to the latter form of veiling; two did not espouse the idea of veiling at all. The variability illustrates veiling practices in South Africa, where local Islamic leaders see hijab as obligatory, but except for family and community, no law or institution can either enforce or prohibit veiling (Vahed, 2007). Because unlike in many other parts of the world, hijab in South Africa has not been subject to systematic research (but see Naidu, 2017), little is known about how Muslim South Africans experience and understand veiling, all the more – how patriarchy is implicated in the experiences and understandings.

The study consisted in semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, which were conducted after participants signed informed consent forms. Apart from questions and visual prompts eliciting participants' notions of the body and beauty, the interviews featured questions generating auto-narrative data, in which the notions were next contextualized. Transcribed verbatim, the data were subject to open coding (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). The codes were next more specifically organized into the units of discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Edley, 2014), which is the study's analytic methodology.

Methodology of data analysis

Discursive psychology (DP) involves studying specific contexts in which language is treated as "the topic itself, not a resource from which the topic is rebuilt" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 173). Examining the 'what' and the 'how' of talk, analysts pursue its consistencies "that reveal the shared sense-making resources ... characteristic of a broader social context" (Edley and Wetherell, 2001, p. 441) as well as contradictions and variability that, DP considers, inhere in social and psychic life (Billig et al., 1988). With its distrust of grand narratives, the poststructuralist strand of DP (Wetherell, 1998), which this study represents, makes no truth claims, and thus consists in qualitative analyses of relatively small data samples, whose size depends on research questions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 161). While this renders DP analyses ineluctably partial and limited, their point is not to represent, but to illustrate processes that, DP regards, cannot be

generalized or quantified. As such, DP is a convenient framework for the current inquiry because it resonates with the study's interest in the nuanced nature of the processes of translation through which hybridity and difference are arrived at.

Regarding difference and hybridity as discursive accomplishments, this study investigates them in terms of *subject positions* and *interpretative repertoires*. By the former DP means vantage points of speaking and seeing (Davies and Harré, 1990), while the latter are routine “arguments, descriptions, and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations” (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 443). These analytical units will make Ponterotto's concepts of hybridity and (commitment to) difference empirically available and transparent. Also crucial in the current study is DP's interest in how speakers' deployments of the socio-culturally available meaning-making reveal “the marks of power relations” (Edley and Wetherell, 2001, p. 441); Davies et al., 2006). As such, DP renders a suitable framework of investigating women's relationship with male gaze, which is, after all, a relation of power.

Data analysis

Due to their bicultural location, apart from talking about the surveillance of women's commitment to veiling, the Muslim interviewees articulated modes of gaze identified across all participant groups. For instance, both the Muslim and the non-Muslim interviewees asserted their dedication to the slim and toned body and, consequently, a self-surveilling relationship with the body. Thus, the Muslim women expressed accountability³ to the discourse of ‘normalized corporeity’, although their bodies have been hidden from the male gaze by abayas or loose-fitting clothes. This is noted here as a caveat that in the study the implications of the male gaze were found more complex than can be demonstrated within the limits of the current discussion. For the limits of space, the analysis below focuses on the relationship with patriarchal surveillance which the interviewees established positioning themselves as women committed to hijab.

Kamilah – translation, hybridity

Kamilaah, a 19-year-old medicine student, came to the interview in non-revealing, loose-fitting clothes. As she explained, Kamilaah wore the headscarf only during religious holidays but considered transitioning to wearing it all the time:

Extract 1

Researcher: But you're not wearing a scarf.

Kamilaah: No. Not all the time, >I should<. But I'm like still getting to the point where I will wear it full time.

Researcher: Why is it now that you're getting to that point?

Kamilaah: You see, like, growing up when I was little, um, you see, in Islam, when you are growing up, when you are little, when you hit puberty, you don't have to wear a headscarf. So when I was little I didn't wear a headscarf. And then, all of a sudden when you hit puberty, you must, you have to start covering yourself up, like cover your, here ((shows her legs and arms))=

Researcher: =So did you notice that or did somebody tell you that you need to cover your head?

³Accounting for their actions, individuals present them as “[according] with the culturally approved standards” (West and Zimmermann, 1987, p.136).

Kamilaah: Um, it's something you know. You are brought up to know, like Muslim girls are modest. So we don't wear like very revealing clothing. So, it's mostly, it's mostly to protect yourself.

Researcher: [Mm]

Kamilaah: [From], like, from, like, just liberate yourself and protect yourself. That's why we cover up. So as a little girl it's not compulsory to wear a headscarf because you're of age. So, it was difficult for me to all of a sudden change to wearing it from not wearing it? So I am currently transitioning now. I would like to go from not wearing it, wearing it more often to wearing it all the time.

Researcher: You would like to? =

Kamilaah: = >Yes< Cause I feel like it defines me as a Muslim girl. It gives me an identity.

Researcher: But is it really liberating?

Kamilaah: ↑It is actually! ↑ It's the way that it makes you feel. It makes you feel like you can identify with other Muslims. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger than just yourself.

Researcher: [Mm]

Kamilaah: [You] have people around you, you know. It's very liberating.

Researcher: Would being free to show whichever part of your body be more liberating?

Kamilaah: No, I never feel like I want to expose myself cause I feel like it's degrading. Like, as a girl, to show up so much of your body, it's not meant for everybody to see it. I feel like it's very degrading. (...) Islam says that women should be modest, they should not expose themselves, you should keep your beauty for yourself and your husband and your family. So a Muslim girl you know that, like growing up you're aware of that. So you wouldn't really want to expose yourself or dress yourself in that way. So I never wanted to dress revealingly, or anything like that. I've always had this, this instinct to cover up.

The extract illustrates the strong link between hijab and the repertoire of gaze, i.e. the routine way of thinking about the body (and self) in terms of how and by whom the body is seen. In Extract 1, the repertoire is related with two subject positions. One of them is the position of the object of the specifically male heterosexual looks—Kamilaah takes the position stating that a woman's beauty is to be seen only by her husband and family ("it's not meant for everybody to see it. I feel like it's very degrading"). The other position is established when Kamilaah invokes collective subjectivity of Muslim women. Namely, apart from explicitly ascribing hijab an identity-forming power ("it defines me as a Muslim girl"), Kamilaah constructs the veil as embodying the defining feature of Muslim femininity, i.e. modesty ("Muslim girls are modest").

At the beginning of Extract 1, the undesirability of the male gaze is constructed as a socially acquired idea but next Kamilaah presents it as her own instinct. The ambivalence is also apparent in Kamilaah's self-correction, when she originally constructs the necessity of veiling as "something you know" (as a Muslim girl) and next qualifies it as something a female Muslim is "*brought up* to know". The latter statement resonates with the modal verbs in the preceding turn ("you must, you have to"), and it indexes veiling as (self-)enforced, rather than intuitive. But then again, Kamilaah positions herself as the agent of veiling, saying for example "So I never wanted to dress revealingly (...). I've always had this, this instinct to cover up." Similarly, at the end of

the extract, the coordinating conjunctive ‘so’ implies a causal link between the imposition to veil (“you should keep your beauty for yourself”) and Kamilaah’s volition to do so (“So I never wanted to dress revealingly”), which further blurs the lines between the subject and object of a prescriptive discourse (Foucault, 1987). Yet, Kamilaah is less ambiguous when she states “And then, all of a sudden when you hit puberty, you must, you have to start covering yourself up”. Here, veiling is not Kamilaah’s instinctual inclination— all of a sudden” and the repeated idea of ‘hitting puberty’ index the necessity of veiling (“you have to start”) as something that took Kamilaah aback rather than something she has always sensed or naturally developed.

Inherently ambivalent, Kamilaah’s relationship with hijab in Extract 1 is, I propose, in its own way transgressive. Kamilaah does a discursively complex work of contextualizing hijab in a culture where veiling is not taken for granted in the way, say, high-heeled shoes and push-up bras are. The extract shows Kamilaah’s marked investment (Hall, 1996, p.6)⁴ in the repertoires of free will and liberation. The latter is invoked explicitly when she constructs hijab as “very liberating”. From the Occidental viewpoint, freedom and emancipation characterize the Western neoliberal individual, rather than the veiled Muslim. The Occidental notion of a submissive Muslim woman has been falsified by many scholars (e.g. Mahmood, 2005) who underscore that veiling is a form of agency, but one that is not recognized by liberal feminists, namely, the religious agency ‘to submit’. Kamilaah’s constructions of agency are, however, ambivalent. First, asserting her commitment to what she constructs as the Islamic prescription of veiling, Kamilaah enunciates religious agency. Yet, later she invests in the position of an individual who wants to follow her personal inclinations. Constructed from culturally distant positions, Kamilaah’s veiled body hybridizes personal freedom, which is celebrated in the Western culture, with commitment to honor and dignity, which are valued in Islam.

In this sense, making sense of her commitment to veiling, Kamilaah positions herself as “neither the one nor the Other” (Bhabba, 1994, p. 10). She constructs her relationship with hijab neither from the culturally established position of the Occidental feminist defying the patriarchal regulation of women’s bodies, nor from its paradigmatic opposite, i.e. the position of the Oriental woman sacrificing her personal liberation. This, I posit, illustrates the empowering potential of translation. Kamilaah rejects accountability to the Western male gaze, i.e. the cultural imperative to look heterosexually appealing). Moreover, while hijab embodies submission to the Islamic, patriarchal imperative not to look appealing to men, Kamilaah mobilizes the repertoires of choice, hence avoiding the position of a submissive woman. Whether through her positioning Kamilaah overturns the patriarchal power of Islam and West is open to discussion due to the contradictions and ambiguities discussed above—it is only a matter of subjective interpretation whether they undermine the sovereignty of Kamilaah’s subjectivity, or if they are intrinsic to the ‘third space’ (Bhabba, 1994) created through translation.

Asimah - difference

Another interviewee who said she was voluntarily transitioning to wearing the headscarf all the time was Asimah, a 21-year-old psychology student (who came to the interview in non-revealing clothes, without the headscarf):

Extract 2

Asimah: It ((hijab)) is compulsory. We believe that for the things you do you get

⁴‘Investing’ in a given identity, speakers take subject positions and use meaning-making resources which are meant to help them to attain a specific interactive goal (Hall, 1996).

sins and rewards. And for the time I am not wearing it I get sins for it. Cause in Quran God says you should cover up. Cause like now I am wearing completely wrong. Because this is tight. A woman's body is supposed to be sacred. So you should never, if somebody looks at you they should not see your figure. Your body is made for you and for your husband. At home I can wear the tightest pants, the shortest tops, but if I leave me flat I need to cover that so that I don't create lust for another man, and I protect myself from any harm.

Throughout the interview, Asimah positioned herself as accountable to the male gaze in more than one way. Firstly, at two points, she used the repertoire of gaze in ways that are not specifically related with hijab discourse—she constructed beauty in terms of what appeals to men (e.g. “I spoke to a few men, and they said that people think skinny women are attractive but they don't really like that”). Secondly, in Extract 2, Asimah uses the repertoire of gaze that inheres in Islam. After all, she constructs the body as “sacred”, but only if veiled—unveiled, the body is profaned by the gaze of anybody else than the woman herself, her husband and family. Apart from positioning herself as morally accountable for donning tight-fitting clothes, Asimah takes the related position of a person responsible for the sexual violence that this demeanor may provoke (“I don't create lust for another man, and I protect myself from any harm”).

Still, despite the interpellating power of the male gaze in Islam which she enunciated, below Asimah revokes the apparent patriarchy of Islam:

Extract 3

Asimah: I feel that in Bloemfontein, I find it ((wearing the headscarf)) very hard basically. But I think it's about the fact that I walk around and I see that people are looking at me... I have this perception that others are watching me.

Researcher: Mm

Asimah: And judging me based on that.

Researcher: How do you think they judge you?

Asimah: Based on what they see on the media? About my religion? Very negative, that it's all violent, and we have this specific way of living and we're... very... polygamous? And yeah, patriarchal.

Extract 3 demonstrates another way of positioning the Muslim female body that the repertoire of gaze occasions. Namely, Asimah shifts from the position of the object of the male gaze to that of the object of the Occidental gaze. The repertoire of gaze underlies Asimah's constructions of the Other-ing stares provoked by her headscarf (“others are watching me”) and of media's portrayals of Islam as inherently aggressive and patriarchal. Talking about the stigma of oppression that hijab attracts (instead of constructing hijab as actually oppressive), Asimah denounces its oppressive power⁵.

From the Western viewpoint, it amounts to an ideological contradiction (Billig et al. 1988) to speak apologetically about wearing tight-fitting clothes and to next deny the oppressive nature of a discourse that forbids this. However, here, unlike Kamilaah, who drew on hybridization, Asimah relies on another counter to Western patriarchy identified by Ponterotto (2016, p.134), namely, commitment to difference. Asimah's investment in difference is evident when she underscores her religious and cultural identification. In Extract 1, she takes the position of a

⁵Later, she did that also explicitly.

Muslim believer talking about “sins” and invoking collective subjectivity of Muslims (“we believe”). In Extract 2, Asimah positions herself defensively as the Muslim ‘Other’. Importantly, Asimah’s commitment to difference has its discursive implications for her relationship with the male gaze. Speaking from the position explicitly grounded in Islam, she rejects accountability for hiding what the Western male gaze expects to see and denounces Occidental, objectifying interpretations of the veiled body as submissive to patriarchy.

Raesa – lost in translation

Another interviewee committed to hijab was Raesa, a 19-year-old medicine student, who dons the headscarf and the abaya in all public places. Similarly to Kamilaah, Raesa invested in the position of a willful agent of veiling. Apart from using the repertoire of choice (e.g. “I choose to wear what I do”, “it is very personal decision”), she constructed hijab as an attire that grants her control (“I control who sees what of me and the only image they see of me is what I choose to put forth”). Raesa also spoke about the psychic implications of veiling:

Extract 4

Researcher: You were 15 when you started wearing abaya. It’s the age when people are concerned with their image=

Raesa: =↑very↑ image-concerned. and I ↑loved↑ the freedom Islam gave me to say don’t worry about that. To be quite honest. I ↑loved↑ that in Islam you don’t have to show off the things you are not comfortable with anyway. You know like=

Researcher: =what weren’t you comfortable with

Raesa: ↑I was still learning my body↑ and I was in that awkward phase in high school. My boobs were, you know, just growing, and I had ↑very big hips↑ and I was not very comfortable with that yet. So it was very difficult to fit clothes like shorts and all of that and I wasn’t comfortable with showing that yet. I couldn’t articulate why it didn’t make me comfortable.

Raesa constructs transitioning to hijab as a moment of relief. Her constructions of the moment are affectively marked (Poynton and Lee, 2011) – increased volume and stronger intonation index Raesa’s emotional investment in hijab as a space of security from aesthetic surveillance. Importantly, Raesa constructs hijab in a way that cannot be traced back to the Quran but is legible in the context of Western culture. Namely, she withholds the patriarchal repertoire of hijab as protecting women from dishonor and constructs hijab as her personal choice of an outfit that she finds comfortable. Establishing a hybrid subjectivity of a free, self-managerial *and* veiled Muslim, Raesa positions herself neither as accountable to the norms of the Occidental aesthetics, nor as accountable to the coercive hijab discourse. This rearticulation of hijab allows Raesa to avoid the position of the object of patriarchal control and to instead establish the position of a woman who controls how her body is related to by others.

Importantly, this construction of veiling is emancipating only to an extent. While the moral accountability to patriarchy is revoked, the aesthetic one—not necessarily. After all, positioning herself as happy to hide her ‘non-normate’ body, Raesa does not defy the cultural imperative of ‘normalized corporeity’. Missing from Extract 4 is the “degrading” and “lustful” male gaze invoked by Kamilaah and Asimah respectively, but the aesthetically exacting demands of the male gaze are not, in fact, questioned. The accountability to the male gaze is even more evident below,

where asked if she would accept her weight gain, Raeesa says:

Extract 6

Raeesa: I think I probably would. I think I'd probably would if I had a partner who, you know would not, would not be obsessed, who would not marry me for my body. You know what I mean, if I end up with a spouse who is caring and understanding,... now that I've gained weight, I'd I'd probably would be fine with it.

Raeesa constructs her body acceptance as conditional on the approval of her husband. This sits squarely with the Islamic notion of making the beauty of a woman's body accessible only to her husband's eyes, and it is also coherent in the context of Western culture, where women's attractiveness is validated by the male heterosexual spectator. Therefore, with reference to Ponterotto's view of hybridity, although Raeesa constructed her commitment to hijab by means of the repertoires derived from Western culture, and hence reached the 'third space' of "neither the one nor the Other" (Bhabba 1994, p. 10), her defiance of patriarchal surveillance is neither complete, nor enduring. Raeesa embodies a hybrid subjectivity incorporating and negotiating culturally distant modes of the male gaze rather than a hybrid subjectivity that annuls them.

Discussion: (in)visible bodies, hybrid subjectivities

Due to the differences between the Muslim and the Occidental codes of body visibility, in Western culture, once veiled, the body of a Muslim woman becomes more visible than without hijab—as it were, conspicuously (in)visible. In Islam, hijabi women are also (in)visible in that they are observed as members of the Muslim community when their bodies, veiled, disappear from men's eyesight—in many contexts, refusing to veil is, after all, commensurate with being denied the 'authentic' Muslim identity. The (in)visibility of the Muslim female body is hence the materialization of two opposite discourses that realize the same, patriarchal, agenda. The interviewees related to both discourses. But did they reject their power?

In the way envisioned by Ponterotto, the women negotiated their relationship with the male gaze through hybridity and commitment to difference. In this article, commending to Ponterotto's theoretical critique of the gaze, I approached individuals' relationship with the gaze empirically, by means of discourse analysis. Consequently, the ideas of hybridity and difference were organized into the analytical units of subject positions and interpretative repertoires. The units allowed illustrating the variability and contingencies of translation, which, as explained, is the process through which 'binaries are cut' and "hybrid sites of meaning" (Bhabba 1994, p. 234) are arrived at. Interrogating the relevance of 'hybridity' and 'difference' to individuals' lived experience, this article demonstrated how theoretical critiques of the male gaze can (and should) be accompanied and thus reinforced by empirical approaches. The small scale of this study is both its limitation and value. As a way of overcoming the former, this article recommends that the approach advanced here be applied in similar analyses—especially because its empirical purchase has been demonstrated above. The small scale of the inquiry is the cost of the depth of insight which it renders into the nuances of individuals' lived relationship with the male gaze.

At an early point of discussion, I distinguished between the hybrid body and subjectivity which it materializes. The analysis brings some interesting findings concerning the distinction. The women's bodies can be regarded as literally hybrid in that they both embody the Western

'normate' and defy it. On the one hand, the shapeless figure of a hijabi woman is a stark point of departure from the Western imagery of female corporeality, in which feminine assets are emphasized by corsets, push up bras etc. On the other, the participants spoke about the ways in which they make their bodies align with the standards of 'normalized corporeity', and resented the ways in which they fail to do so. Clearly, the bodies materialize the subjectivities that the interviewees established in their accounts. In the accounts, on the one hand, the women renounced the onus of making their physical appeal publically available, on the other hand, they positioned themselves as accountable for embodying the sleek and toned normate.

At the same time, the findings suggest that individuals' personal relationship with the male gaze is more complex than what appears to the eye. The veiled body, with no curves and cleavages etc., seems to reject the intepellating discourse of the male gaze but the individual behind the veil may in fact perceive her body precisely through the (internalized) male gaze. The veiled body may seem to embody submission to the patriarchal discourse that holds women responsible for the sexual violence inflicted on them; yet, the woman donning hijab may be found to understand her demeanor otherwise than in terms of her moral accountability for it.

Locating their bodies in hijab discourse, the interviewees positioned themselves to concurrent modes of the male gaze—of the heterosexual spectator, the husband, and the Muslim community. Their relationship with the patriarchal surveillance was however far from unequivocal. Hybridizing culturally disparate notions of agency (personal and religious), Kamilaah positioned herself as neither completely submitted, nor wholly independent. Enunciating her commitment to difference from the heterosexually appealing 'normate', Asimah challenged the Western male gaze, but she also installed her body in the center of the Muslim patriarchal surveillance, which she both defied and reproduced. Raesa's commitment to difference from the aesthetically pleasing 'normate' did not unequivocally annul its symbolic power, i.e. the normative implications of the 'normalized corporeity' for how she personally feels about her body.

Given these equivocations and ambivalences, the article posits that individuals' relationship cannot be thought through the binary of resistance and submission (Mahmood 2005). Hence, rather than explore if and how the male gaze is resisted or complied with, a more productive line of analysis is investigating the ways in which the male gaze is negotiated. Provisional and fragile, the positions of resistance to some forms of the male gaze interwove and did not necessarily annul the positions of accountability to it. Similarly to how Tate finds 'Black beauty' hybrid but dialogically related with the essentialism(s) it departs from, the participants negotiated between two essentialist modes of gaze by compromising rather than revoking them. While transgressive in their own ways, the interviewees' subjectivities were not completely removed from the normative, implicitly and explicitly patriarchal, body discourses. The women's resistance to the male gaze took form of discursive *moments*.

This, apart from pointing to the poststructuralist understanding of the subject as inherently fluid and indefinite, demonstrates the necessity of a thorough analytical engagement with the processes of translation. Hybridity and difference offer interesting routes out of the rigidity of the 'normalized corporeity' as long as the male gaze controlling bodily aesthetics and codes of visibility is expected in the sidelines. Its implicit surveillance may be 'lost in translation' by individuals negotiating their ways with the patriarchal surveillance, and it is the role of researchers to trace it and point out for the further work of constructive resistance.

Transcription Notes

.	stopping fall in tone
>talk<	a faster stretch of talk
...	longer silence
?	rising intonation
[...]	omitted material
(())	transcriber's comments, not transcription
[talk]	overlapping utterances

[Adapted from Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998, pp. vi–vii)]

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