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# Performance as Embodied Narratives in Young Italian Muslim Women

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*Abstract.* This paper presents a theoretical framework, which conceptualizes Muslims women everyday life with particular reference to the body and the intimate sphere. The paper has two main objectives. The first, more relevant, is to clarify the concept of performance, which is described as a narrative form that primarily calls into question the body and which appears as a mimetic rather than conceptual reflexivity (Lash, 1993). The second objective, of methodological nature, implies the presentation of a tool for analyzing the documental material collected during the research and its potential in interpreting the women narratives. Our general aim is to question the concept of representation of the experience and to understand how the actors “perform” their social experience.

*Keywords:* performance, embodied narratives, women, Islam

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## Introduction

This work is a part of a larger research project on women of Muslim culture living in Italy. The general aim of the research is to investigate the social experience of women in order to understand the articulation of the logic of action that defines it. Our analysis is focused mainly on daily cultural practices and creativity, with particular reference to the body and the intimate sphere. However, in this paper, the results of the research are not discussed, as it is our intention to illustrate the theoretical premises, which have led us to the definition of the tool for analyzing the great narrative text emerged from research activities and illustrate the tool itself. The overall corpus consists of transcripts of interviews and focus groups, research notes collected following the transmedial storytelling and participant observation in public events<sup>1</sup>.

The analytical device has helped us interpreting the actor's narratives going beyond the concept of representation of the experience and using *performance* as a conceptual tool to understand the way women move themselves in everyday life.

Performance studies typically involve an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, anthropology, gender studies, psychoanalysis, queer theory. In this constellation of meanings a relevant place belongs to the concept of performativity, outlined above all by the post-structuralist tradition including Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and in part by the work of Judith Butler. The latter scholar describes *drag* as a performance that parodies the model of gender: in "imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency" (Butler, 2009, p. 175). Being no longer credible as an *inner truth* of dispositions and identities, sex will turn out to be a signification performed freeing itself of its naturalized interiority.

The performance thus introduces a critique of essentialism emphasizing the action and the body that seems to grasp the way in which social actors, especially the young, face cultural changes. Therefore, the reason that convinced us to use the concept of performance is related to the limits of the concept of identity, which we have immediately experienced during the fieldwork. Furthermore the concept of performance seems very appropriate in defining itself as a controversial answer to the main socio-cultural changes of advanced modernity, such as, simplifying<sup>2</sup>, the singularization of experience and the desire to feel unique and special (Martuccelli, 2006);

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Celeste Papuli for her invaluable collaboration in conducting interviews.

<sup>2</sup> These narratives constitute the contemporary sociological debate; we have chosen to cite only those scholars who have guided our paper.

the effects of media-worlds (Boccia Artieri, 2004; 2015) in social experience and the pressing demands of technonichilist capitalism (Magatti, 2009) to be ever more performative. What we mean to say is that there is no defined identity that intends to represent itself and be finally recognized, but a mimetic reflexivity that is expressed in a daily performance. From our point of view, performance is an act of affirmation and distinction in the social, which is increasingly trans-medial. The women we met during our research claim for visibility and, by marking the *interpenetration* between Islam and Europe (Göle, 2005; 2015), ask for a more inclusive social sphere. In conclusion, our research highlights that Muslim women living in Italy, especially second generation<sup>3</sup>, perform difference exploiting a reflexivity that is both mimetic (Lash, 1993; 1994) and connected (Boccia Artieri, 2012). They move in a contiguous space between online and offline with aesthetic reflexivity with the aim of being recognized as women inside and outside the global virtual community (Fassari & Pompili, 2017). Performance contributes to the everyday construction of women Italian Islam.

The paper has two main objectives. The first is to clarify the concept of *performance* understood as an embodied narrative, which could be primarily considered a mimetic reflexivity rather than a conceptual one (Lash, 1993). The second objective is to illustrate the methodological tool used to analyze the data collected during the research.

In the first paragraph, we explain the shift from representations to performance to highlight the interpretative relevance of performance in understanding contemporary social experience; in the second, we underline the evident relationship between performance and the body trying to grasp this relationship in the studies that deal with the different genealogies, the Western and the Islamic. Starting from these theoretical approaches, in the third paragraph, we present our methodological proposal illustrating the operational strategies to manage the field research actions, the collection and analysis of empirical data, and the interpretative tool that has allowed us to fill this concept with experiential contents. Finally, in the conclusions we share some research results that show how the mimetic reflexivity that is realized with a performance is already an aesthetic reflexive practice adopted during the years of scholastic education, especially in the upper secondary

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<sup>3</sup> In migration studies the term “first generation” defines immigrants living in the host country after the age of 15; the second generation, instead, are immigrant children who are born in the host country. According to the concept of interpenetration (Göle, 2005; 2015) in this research no methodological relevance has been assigned to these classifications: the social category of Muslim Europeans, or specifically Muslim Italians, in fact, points to a new and different subjectivization that is no longer framed in the category of immigrants characterized by the cultural and religious specificities of their country of origin (see other researches on the same topic, Frisina, 2010; Joly, 2010; Maddanu, 2013; 2014; Joly & Khurshheed, 2017; Fassari & Pompili, 2017).

school. During the school experience the young Muslim women learn to creatively hybridize conceptual and aesthetic reflexivity (Fassari & Pompili, 2017).

### Performance beyond identity

What are the reasons that led us on focusing on the verb “to perform”? The first reason, already mentioned, is to avoid the misunderstandings connected to the use of a terminology closer to the concept of cultural identity. These limits were in different works already highlighted by Touraine (1993) and others Cadis<sup>4</sup> scholars (Wiewiorka, 2006; Dubet, 2004; Martuccelli, 2006; to quote only few authors), which prefer the word subject or subjectivity. Identity refers to something, which maintains certain continuity with the dimension of belonging. From the results of the research it seems rather that not only the identity but also the subject has rather blurred borders. Thus, belonging is simply one of the logics, which affect social experience and appears quite *invented* as a strategical *handhold* to find a position in social complexity. The research results have led us to appreciate criticism in post-structuralist philosophy and its rejection of the idea of a unitary subject. The narratives disclose that the cultural difference is often marked as a situated and temporary experience (Deleuze, 1997). Most of the interviewees *perform* muslimness in the evidence of a personal research in which the relationships and encounters they experience are left open to be constantly reviewed.

Returning to Butler, in *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection* (1997, p. 137) she warns us on gender performativity: gender is not *expressed* by actions, gestures or language, but it is performed retroactively, while the idea of an internal gender core is rejected as *blinding* by the author. Similarly, we can refer to culture and yet being alerted on the attempt to essentialize it or even worse to racialize it. There is no pure Muslim culture, and on the other hand there is no soft multiculturalism because as Göle (2013, p.32) writes “there is a bodily, sexual, but also forced and violent aspect in this encounter”. Being Muslim for women we met was defined in relation to us, to our prejudice, to our imaginary, to our hosting policies. Performance seems to be related to our projection on muslimness and sometimes the way it is performed is a creative response both to the community and to the society in order to affirm a singularity. In this sense the question is not to define

<sup>4</sup> Cadis - Centre d'analyse et d'intervention sociologiques- was founded in 1981 by Alain Touraine, and among its members are Francois Dubet, Michael Wiewiorka, Nilufer Göle, Danilo Martuccelli, Antimo Farro, Daniel Jolie, Farhad Khosrokhavar. It is no longer active centre. The CADIS was defined by an original theoretical space where forms of individual and collective mobilization in contemporary societies were studied.

who is the Muslim in our societies but to understand muslimness as a temporary position in a cartography. This means that belonging, for how much is claimed, coexists with a continuous sense of becoming.

The second reason, which suggested us to appeal to performance, is to put the cultural within the hypermedial question of contemporary society. The concept of performance allows to capture the real and virtual society. In interpreting the relationship between the subject and the hypermedial context, we have to review the theories of the derealizing simulacrum (Debord, 1967; Baudrillard, 1995) and consider the media experience as an ambivalent cultural experience, which carries also the task of re-signification by social actors. This virtual turn naturally brings perverse effects. Perniola (see the new edition, after thirty years, of his book *La società dei simulacri*) finds the hypermedial society permeated by what he defines “need of realism” (Perniola, 1980, p.76). The audience, says the scholar, literally wants “to see” reality. This *naive* attitude, Perniola argues, brings with it the affirmation of a hyper-realistic image that refers to the pre-imagined original. In this perspective, attending social media is interpreted above all as a derealizing inebriation and a dissolution of reality.

The results of our research however suggest a different reading. As we understood it, performance is closer to Klossowski’s simulacrum in which there is not nostalgia for something conceived as primary. Klossowski (1969) writes that the “driving depth” cannot be expressed in words, but in an instant of excitement: it is unintelligible. Emotion is by its nature unspeakable and incommunicable, therefore the relation with the real is made possible through resemblance. In this unsolvable, indissoluble, hybrid between social and media space, the contribution of the actor to the great social text is placed. The image is not only the derealizing simulacrum as Perniola himself admits, but also a “raft” to access the contemporary social-media world. It is by clinging to the simulacrum that the social actor asserts its participation in the society. Social media are not the stage of their representation, but as Klossowski had anticipated, they lead to the “end of representation”. In this version we find a language of action on the world, which is configured as a criticism of the institutional language. Following our women in their trans-medial storytelling was not just an enrichment of the work but an additional source to catch the performance or the way of doing the social.

There is also finally another way to interpret the concept of performance which is associated to the advent of neoliberalism. Here the term performance refers to something completely different; it refers back to the handbook for managers of the 90s, in which the rhetoric of self-control in a system of increasing personal responsibility takes over. Creativity, especially since the 80s, becomes an opportunity for profit, accompanied by an exhausting demand for innovation and to be performative, a vision that has slipped from

the company to every area of social life (Boltansky & Chiappello, 1999). It evokes the measure of self as a figure of contemporaneity. As Latour (1986) argues, the transformation of “meat into data” is one of the characteristics that define our contemporary lives. The performance and its measurement would represent the mixed effect of hypermedial and deregulated social space (Perniola, 2009). From this point of view, this sort of performative reflexivity that we have tried to delineate could be characterized as an ambivalent and situated response to the endless demand for high performance in neoliberal societies. Performativity could certainly mean to conform to the new spirit of capitalism prescriptions to be continuously innovative, creative, and communicative. At the same time, taking into account the *performative turn* in cultural theory of the last decade, *performance* could be a strategy to affirm the rejection and criticism of the demands of the new disciplinary regime and revalue life and eros as psychic excess that can never be grasped or reduced by the neoliberal logic. Performance can represent a sort of acting-out to go beyond the paralysis of contemporary dilemmas (Fassari, 2019). To make sense of this last hypothesis we turned to the transition to performance as a passage from the textual nature of the world delegated to intellectuals to a more individualized and mimetic narrative form and realized by the subjects themselves (Abruzzese, 1998). This turn also brings out the implication of a renewed interest in creativity marked by the break with a sort of pre-imagined fixed representations towards a more dynamic process intrinsic to performance. Following Victor Turner (1988), the dichotomy between representation and performance helps us to understand how in the second word the uncertainties, the experiences, the incomplete elliptic personal experiences that characterize the contemporary experience converge.

### **Performativity as embodied narrative**

According to Deleuze, thinking not representatively implies to break the fixity of representation and creates movement (Deleuze, 1997). The shift from representation to performance highlights the transition from a way of thinking the difference within a hierarchical model that prescribes what can be thought, to another in which difference is produced through the variability of the bodies in interaction. In this shift we can understand the body relevance in the performance and the centrality of gestural writing.

As Lash (2000) stated, the sociological theory of action in its tradition (Parsons, to Goffman and Bourdieu) has found in the “genealogy” of Foucault, Deleuze and Nietzsche the basin from which to draw (Lash, 2000). All these scholars agree that genealogy is based on knowledge, power and above all on the body (Lash, 2000).

Foucault with *The Story of Madness* and the *History of Sexuality* offers a portrait of the female body - from mental health to sexuality - structured by familistic instances (cit. in Lash, 2000). There is no place for autonomous, positive libido. The body of which Foucault talks about is totally docile. Instead Deleuze is the one who is oriented towards the development of a notion of desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975). For Deleuze the body is the surface in which social forces are structured. It is not about organic but phantomatic forces. It is the interplay of these forces that gives form and specific quality to the body. Certainly it is a socially structured libido but it suggests the presence of a mechanism that pushes to reproduction by adding to the critical power of the genealogy something that, as Lash suggests, we should not try to understand. The Deleuzian body is not totally a *docile* body. It illuminates the idea of *becoming* in relation to power, creativity and affect.

From this few hints, we can fully understand the complexity of the conceptualization of the body in contemporary sociology. What we can grasp is that the body appears to us as a place of exaggeration and intersection of social, organic and phantasmal forces. A surface in which desire, pleasure, domination are structured.

In trying to understand how the body has been interpreted in the Islamic religion Chebel's statement is substantial for its simplifying strength: "the body remains an active element in social and cultural conditioning" (2012, p. 31). At the beginning, Islam, as a monotheistic religion, considers the body just worshipping Allah (*ibidem*, p.14). Ritual prayer allows us to immediately access the original use reserved for the body. It is the starting point of the worship of God but also the point of arrival, the real act of this adoration. Ritual prayer is divided into a defined sequence of movements: kneeling, prostration, and greeting. This ritual is under the unshakable idea of submitting to God. Contrary to the freedom of expression left to the body male, very early the body of little girls is subjected to a repertoire of prohibitions; these limits allow their bodies to occupy only the preformed and pre-invested space by the mentality of the community (he refers mainly to the Maghreb). The girl's body must be an example of stiffness of bearing; this is valid for the first years of childhood, but it crystallises into a perceptual identity that will persecute women until death and even afterwards. This type of gesture limits the expressive potentials of the bodies; it can be mitigated only by the dance in festive situations (*ibidem*, p.44). The body is above all a matter of body techniques and integration into the complex of traditional culture. This leads us to questioning eroticism by the women point of view. The literature on this issue is practically non-existent, Chebel affirms. The common opinion naively states that the woman is bonded to her totality, she undergoes male despotism, and she is victim of an unrepentant phallocentrism. However the scholar warns us that reality is much more



complex than we think; in these societies the woman controls all the conditions that define the real life of the family, the everyday life that in some way controls the destiny of society. Although the strict moral control *placed* on the female abdomen, it speaks profoundly about the initiatives that seem to come only from the man (*ibidem*, p.154).

This is not the context to investigate the different “archeologies”, the developments and evolutions of the body in Islam and in the West, but studying this literature, and sharing the recursive reflexivity on the research approach (Bichi, 2002), at stage of the research, we asked ourselves if the body meaning attributed by the researchers was self-referential (in the sense that it belong to our culture and to the most recent history); if the way we talked about body, desire, pleasure could be understood or shared with our interviewed; above all, how the encounter or clash of our respective belongings could absorb this tension. We do not intend to answer these questions here, but it is from this tension that comes the attempt to develop the interpretative tool presented below (par. 3) to differentiate the ways in which the body is lived by our interlocutors.

### **The analytical tool**

Starting from the theoretical premises expressed in the preceding paragraphs, our aim was to construct a methodological instrumentation coherent with the conceptual dimension of performance declined in the analysis of the body movements (the embodied narratives) in the social experience of young Italian Muslim women. We used the term performance as contemporary social representation able to make us understand the muslimness in their daily bodily movement. The attention in the data collection phase was given to the body, in its various forms: as a docile body, as a cure for the self, as pleasure and desire, as lived body (Foucault, 1992; 1994; Deleuze, 1990; Deleuze & Guattari, 1975; Lash, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). During the interviews, the focus group and the public events, we have been affected by their mood, their fashion in living the experience of the interview, the way in which they expressed themselves and narrated their bodily daily practices, memories and important events in their lives. It is above all the *movement of culture* that we have learned from them.

The first analytical action was to compare what emerges from the Western tradition on body studies and those from of Arab scholars such as Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (2007), Ibrahim Mahmoud (2010), Malek Chebel (2012), Farid al-Zahi (1999). This allowed us to build a specific tool to analyze the interviews and the collected documentary material and to implement the concept of interpenetration (Göle, 2015) on the field research practices.

In particular, we considered fruitful bringing together our reflection with that of al-Zahi (1999). This Moroccan scholar has for a long time compared the studies of Western authors such as Foucault, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty, Eliade and Lacan. In his work *The body, its image and the sacred in Islam (ibidem)*, he tries to overcome the limits of Arab studies on the body, until then focused only on the aspects related to aesthetic beauty and sexuality and thus offering a partial and not holistic view of the body. Kugle (2007) illustrating the work of this scholar, shows us how using a subtlety of the Arabic language, al-Zahi integrates the different conceptions of the body present in Western literature as different dimensions of a single bodily experience. He introduces a stratified conception of the body, like concentric circles where *jasad*, the body in its physicality, is placed at the center as a priori given; it is through the upper layers that it connects with the outside world remaining influenced by it. *Jasad* is the hub of life and drives, of action and awareness. The next layer of bodily experience is *jasadi*, the corporal, the expressive dimension, the body as the medium of communication in its multiple modes: when it is silent, when it speaks through the face, when it fights, when it socializes, when it is engaged in any social action; it can be traced back to *the techniques of the body* (Mauss, 1973) through which the body socializes and relates to other bodies. On the contrary, *jasadani*, with which we mean the corporeal, is an “inverted body” because it is a hidden and personal dimension, all facing inward, towards the biological dynamics that allow the body to act, to follow the sexual and biological impulses, of dictate the conditions in intimate and sexual relationships, and include everything that is usually not spoken in public (menstruation, secretions, ejaculation, etc.). Finally there is *jasadaniyya*, the most abstract dimension, that image of the imagination that allows us to conceive human existence as founded in a body but also as something that goes beyond this. In fact, the physical body is often also a social body that through signs expresses its needs (nutrition, protection, sex, hygiene, emotionality, etc.) and it finds satisfaction through connection and cooperation with others. It is what allows the individual part to be part of a social body where life is not reduced to a biological organism but expands into something larger. They are thoughts, images and imaginations that make a person be much more than a body. The whole of these layers constitutes the experience of incorporation (Kugle, 2007).

Starting from this stratification, al-Zahi distinguishes four modalities of relating to the body which the author defines states of awareness:

- being against the body
- being through the body
- being with the body
- being in the body

These four modalities, which in many cases imply an intersection of the stratifications, because just as the scholar states is the set of these layers to constitute the embodiment, drove the construction of our interpretative tool that enabled us to read the interviews for thematic areas, defined by the stratification of the body of al-Zahi, but also as a unicum that reveals their positioning in being observed and the less visible aspects, such as the tone of voice, the emotion, the relationship with us, the communication, in short the performance in being with their body in the interview. We can say that from these four modalities we have drawn substantially inspiration though in the narrations we have not found excerpts capable of exemplifying them clearly; moreover the definition of *state of awareness* seemed to us not very relevant because in many cases emerges a way of being in the body that is absolutely unaware.

Table 1 - The analytical tool

STATE OF AWARENESS				
Being against the body	Being through the body	Being with the body	Being in the body	Interviewer notes
My father is very religious and he prays every day, even my mother. I also started recently and I try to do it 5 times a day even if it is a bit 'difficult because ... maybe I want to do something else. But I consider it important. In my opinion it is right to do it.	<p>If you know that program "Uomini e donne"?... so George likes always touches at the first date... as you say chemistry... We can't touch before marriage, we can't. Don't think that I'm judging... I want to say that I saw a strange thing... because also some girls in television don't want to be touched by man at first date... so I think that for me is a question of religion but she isn't Muslim and for her is the same thing, don't want, because she has honor, there is that honor inside also without religion... and I think she is like me!</p>	When I know a guy I want to hug him and in fact I did it. Even if it's bad because you do it secretly. But I had the desire to know him so we agreed on social networks. Sometimes we saw each other in Rome or somewhere. Only my sister and my friends knew, that they were in my same situation.	My mother has always encouraged us to study to have a chance to do something else. You can choose from more things. The study gives you the alternative. It is the basis of everything, culture and knowledge. If you don't know you are afraid and ignorance causes pain. I think, for example, to the fear of the other. And I lived it on my skin.	The girl was introduced to us by another interviewed. She lives in the suburbs but has reached us in the center of the city. She met us smiling at the meeting place and while we reach the room in the department she tells us her adventures on the bus. She wears the typical modest fashion clothing: a colored veil and the whole body covered except the hands (very accurate and colored nails). During the interview she sits comfortably and plays with necklace and bracelets she wears.

Entering the specific interpretation and therefore the use of the instrument (see table 1), in the first quadrant “Being against the body” we have included all the excerpts of the interviews where the body is seen above all as a biological data to be governed, then with expressions related to hunger, thirst, fasting, feel warm or cold, where the social actor defines the body as a way to affirm one’s own will, an intentionality, a capacity for domination over it. It does not always start from the actor’s will, in fact, we have also reported in this quadrant all those situations in which the domain is exercised by the respect of social and religious norms, from community or traditional pressures.

“Fasting, getting up at dawn to pray, gives me strength, wearing the veil gives me strength” (Donja, 24 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

“When I started to go out in middle school I was afraid that my parents would see me with males... I remember their speeches when they told me behave like a woman!... Now they don’t tell me anything because I know what I can or can’t do” (Nadine., 23 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

As we can read from excerpts, on the one hand we have a domain that we could define positive and have to deal with Foucault’s “technologies of the self”<sup>5</sup>, on the other, a whole series of restrictions that these women are self-inflicted, often without awareness, since the domain comes to follow the principle of integration and compliance with community implicit norms.

“Being through the body” is instead a modality that emerges above all when the body is used as an instrument of communication with the outside world. In this quadrant we inserted those excerpt in which women narrated situations in which the body is engaged in social activities: it is an instrumental function that includes both how they want and wish to communicate, and how they communicate under a dominion.

“I started wearing the veil at university, not because my parents forced me, but as an act of revolution against the stereotype of the Muslim girl always locked in the house” (Sailha., 27 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

“...yes, I would like it, but I do not wear it because I think it’s limiting ... the veil is a sign, it’s a sign that separates you from others a<sup>nd</sup> that automatically makes you something different” (Karima, 23 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of Foucault’s “technologies of the self” the debate is very wide, here the reference is to the introduction of Martin, Gutnam and Hutton to the text “Technologies of the Self. A seminar with Michel Foucault” edited by the same authors. In the book’s introduction they write that in the Vermont seminar Foucault would have expressed a new project. In this new project rather than proceed with the study of technologies of power and domination, whereby the self has been objectified through scientific inquiry, Foucault was interested to investigate those practices whereby individuals acted on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to transform themselves. To these self-employment practices that we refer in the paper.

What is the distinction between the first and the second quadrant? In the first one the body is above all a biological datum, it is the *Jasad* fulcrum of life, while in the second it is *Jasadi*, the body in its expressive function and instrument of communication towards the outside. The latter is the way in which the body is used to communicate itself to the world, regardless of the type of communication, whether it is heterodirect or produced by an internal dialogue, or the result of a reflection very close to that aesthetic reflexivity that speaks to us Lash (1994) in criticizing the cognitive reflexivity of Giddens.

The third quadrant “Being with the body”, concerns the inner dynamics. It is *jasadani*, the body inverted and all turned inwards; it speaks with its own *voice* that are sexual and biological impulses. Here we have included all those narrations in which women told us about a body that moves in harmony with their own feeling. It is not about instinct or intentionality, but rather about a desire as a flow. In the stories told women experience an intimacy with their body, they do not arise before or after it, they simply move in symbiosis.

“In intimacy with my husband, I follow my own desire, if I don’t feel like it, I don’t do it, if I am tired, I don’t do it” (Marja, 33 years, 1<sup>st</sup> G.)

Here we do not have the docile body of Foucault devastated by the history that imposes its dominion on it, or the regimes that shape it, rather the “disputed body” of which Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975) speaks, which overcomes the passive body as plurality of irreducible forces, crossed by desire understood as flow. It is the “lived body” of Merleau-Ponty (1945) but without intentionality; it is the moving body of Nietzsche but without energy.

The difference in the definition of the third and the fourth quadrant may appear subtle, but in the interpretative work is the opposite. If the third quadrant concerns the inner dynamics, the fourth “Being in the body” prefigures the loosening of control and the projection of the body elsewhere. Here we do not find narratives related to everyday life or about moments of harmony with their body, here the women are not dominated, controlled or *forced* into a communication to each other.

“When I pray (she shows me the physical position), I place my forehead on the ground, I hear the sudden silence around me, everything melts away, fatigue disappears, and I feel just united with God, it’s good for me it gives me strength” (Jasmine, 23, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

Here we are in the field of imaginary, of desire, where “I could be better”. Here the narratives tell us about dreams, about plans for the future, but also about forms of rebellion against Western prejudice.

“Living in Italy I don’t have great ambitions, because I don’t want to go to interview for job and then being discarded because of the veil. And I don’t want to leave the veil, so I prefer to go to another country. I hope I can find a job because I don’t like to be a housewife, I hate it! I hope to have a family because I love children so I hope to have many children” (Marsa., 24 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> G.)

Finally, in the fifth quadrant we inserted the notes of the interviewer collected during the interview. They refer to the way in which the interview relation was constructed, to the way they present themselves also through clothing and aesthetic care, but above all to gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice during narrations, to the positions taken by their body in relating with the interviewer; in short, all that pertains to their being in relation with a researcher and can be defined as performativity in the interview situation.

The empirical data of this work, collected in Rome between 2016 and 2018, consists of fifty interviews with young Muslim women living in Italy between the ages of 18 and 35, and two focus-group with ten participants. All the interviewees were thus reached through word of mouth among our contacts, or through the collaboration of associations involved in the hosting policies of migrant women. We also contacted them through social networks. The first focus group was held at the Al-Huda mosque in Centocelle and the second at the headquarters of a voluntary association working on the territory with migrant women. In the course of the research we also had the opportunity to participate in some public events and parties promoted by Muslim cultural centres and associations working on issues of peaceful coexistence among peoples.

The interviewees were in some ways heterogeneous, but in line with other research (Frisina, 2010; Joly, 2010; Maddanu, 2013; 2014; Joly & Khursheed, 2017; Fassari & Pompili, 2017), the women were part of communities with backgrounds in Muslim majority countries, whatever their degree of practice or belief. Limits seem to be compensated by the in-depth investigation. The research team was composed by women with the aim to establish that complicity that allows us to deal with issues related to the body and intimacy. These are in depth interviews (Bichi, 2002) lasting an average of two hours that required a lot of care and competence in conducting interviews, to try to build a setting that could be considered comfortable and intimate for our interviewees.

In addition to these research activities there was an on-desk analysis of the fairy tales of the Islamic tradition and some meetings with Muslim artists.

As anticipated in the introduction, the great narrative text emerges from the transcription of these interviews and focus groups, but also from the

notes of research gathered *following* the transmedial storytelling and during the meeting and public events that we were able to attend.

## Implications

The objectives of the essay are to illustrate the theoretical premises that underlie a methodological proposal for an intercultural sociological analysis or, as we prefer, oriented towards a more conscious cultural interpenetration and the construction of an analytical and interpretative tool to make operational this objective.

The implications of the work in its immediacy are therefore to verify to what extent an analytical instrument centered on the performative dimension can enrich the study of cultural interpenetration and social construction of Italian Islam starting from a dimension that Lash (2000) would call more “unconscious” and therefore not oriented too cognitively. The body of the Muslim woman in Italy is a paradoxical place, a site in which many social, symbolic and discursive dimensions are intertwined. Most of the women we met exhibit their being Muslim in relation to our projections rather than a supposed archetype. The body does not emerge either as a sacred inner space, nor as a purely social entity, rather (women) pursue the modern ideal of being unique and the body interprets in this objective a truly unavoidable role. The body of women is connected in a reflective way, both inside and outside the network. They use positioning strategies that express a mimetic reflexivity on their being Muslim *represented by representation*, without the sequentiality of an original identity that is reproduced. The reference to muslimness identity is always filtered by the desire to be unique. Performance expresses a positioning, forces us to think not in terms of belonging, but of maps.

The school is a tangible space for experimenting with performance. Praying, fasting, eating halal food, wear veils or special clothing for sport activity are just few practices in which the body is involved and therefore characterized by their being performative. As a previous research (Fassari & Pompili, 2016) has shown the school rethoric, materialized in multiple intercultural projects, does not seem adequate to deal with the controversial complexity of interconnections between religious symbols, reversal of sexual roles, women’s bodies and market laws and the desire (Göle, 2005) to which these practices are deeply linked. At school there is a tendency to treat practices superficially, often sliding towards what Serpieri and Grimaldi (2013) call a “pedagogy of indifference”. An institutional response, which reduces the interculture to a pedagogical practice in which cultural issues are depoliticized, might not be enough. The school is the place where the encounter with the other becomes erotic, playful but also discriminatory and violent. Wearing

the veil, prostrating oneself for prayer and observing other religious precepts are practices that are visible and controversial. It is through performance, as outlined in this essay, that this complexity is retained. In a world, that is a media-world, these women assume a position which requires increasingly complex, miraculous and traumatic strategies, Perniola would say (2009).

The school is the place where the value of conceptual reflexivity in questioning the knowledge itself is learned. But equally strongly it is the place where an aesthetic and hermeneutical criticism of conceptual reflexivity is practiced. The women we interviewed are able to criticize universals by aesthetic reflexivity, in a hermeneutical direction capable of influencing a reflexivity on the forms in which the domination is expressed (Fassari & Pompili, 2017).

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