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“The Muslim Question” and Muslim Women Talking Back¹

Abstract

In this article, I draw on critical investigations of gendered, racialised and sexualised discourses on Islam and Muslim minorities in Western Europe to explore two recent instances of Muslim female intellectuals and artists responding to what has been dubbed “the Muslim question”. I shall show that Muslim women’s counter-voices are multilayered, conveyed through various means, and context-dependent, as well as dependent on intersectional marginalised positionalities. My goal is to theoretically rethink the feminist methodology of ‘talking back’ on the basis of the complex ways in which Muslim women establish modes of critique.

Keywords: Islam and Muslim in Europe; “the Muslim question”; public debates; art and literature; Muslim women; talking back

The Muslim (woman) question

What makes a woman strong?

Is it the way she endures, so someone else doesn’t have to be the victim?

[...] Knows the world’s secret

While she keeps being disrespected, dishonoured, blamed, violated

I don’t like how they talk about you

Like you don’t carry the world on your back.

(Samira Saleh, 30 November 2016, Brussels, Belgium)

¹ I would like to thank Margreet van Es, Martijn de Koning, Mariecke van den Berg and Sakina Loukili – as fellow members of our informal Talking Back network – as well as the anonymous peer reviewers, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

This poem was performed by the Belgian slam poet Samira Saleh on 30 November 2016 during a public event in the Kaaaitheater in Brussels held in honour of the influential Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist Fatema Mernissi, who died in December 2015. Saleh's poem can be understood as addressing a variety of audiences. Given its occasion and its location, it can be read as referring to feminist critiques of women's positions as articulated from within Muslim-majority societies; as talking about Muslim women's position within Muslim communities in the diaspora; and/or as critiquing negative stereotypes that exist across Western European settings among non-Muslim majorities about Muslim women being oppressed and submissive. Taking into account that Saleh speaks out as a feminist and antiracist headscarf-wearing Muslim slam poet, the poem can be understood as revealing the effect of dominant representations of Muslim women as constructing a discursive context that Muslim women can hardly escape. By targeting a multiplicity of audiences through her art, she addresses not only gender but also race and ethnicity, and their intersections.

In this article, I shall consider Muslim women's responses to what has been dubbed "the Muslim question" in Europe in order to explore the variety of instances in which women raise their voice, as well as some of the positions from which they speak. Generally, across Western Europe, public debates and policy-making address Muslims as minority migrant communities with presumed difficulties in adjusting to liberal and secularised societies, and have recently shifted to problematising Islam and Muslims in terms of security and the threat of global and local terrorism.² In this context, Matteo Gianni insightfully considers "the Muslim question" as constructed by representations that rely on a conglomerate of social discourses, normative stances and empirical statements that perform and construct Muslims as figures of otherness and danger that must be securitised and assimilated in order to protect democratic values, procedures and institutions.³ In this rendering, "the Muslim question" is about notions of Muslims' integration and political subjectivity, and the construction of Muslims, Islam and Muslimness as essentially "different" from so-called Western culture and

² Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Sami Zemni, "Islam between Jihadi Threats and Islamist Insecurities? Evidence from Belgium and Morocco", *Mediterranean Politics* 11 (2006): 231–253.

³ Matteo Gianni, "Muslims' Integration as a Way to Defuse the 'Muslim Question': Insights from the Swiss Case", *Critical Research on Religion* 14 (2016), 2–36, p. 22.

society. Jennifer Selby and Lori Beaman argue for taking up “the Muslim question” not to reify its Huntingtonian assumptions but as a critical analytical lens that would “re-pose” it so as “to situate and evaluate its contexts, its politics and its emotional quotient and inquire about how the question might be reposed or dispensed with altogether”.⁴ I agree that this is important work to do, since situating “the Muslim question” in the local settings in which it emerges helps us to find (g)locally proper ways to answer to the challenges faced. In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that “the Muslim question” has already been conceptualised in various ways, depending on the context of research and the disciplinary tools at hand. In *On the Muslim Question*, for example, political scientist Anne Norton argues that post-Enlightenment Western secularisms have not produced their promised neutrality, impartiality and rationality and that anxiety regarding this failure has led to the construction of the singular figure “Muslim” in both Western Europe and North America. Therefore, what is really at stake in “the Muslim question” is the “value of Western civilization”.⁵ While anxieties about equality and justice as linked to the failure of secularism do indeed infuse “the Muslim question”, what Norton overlooks are the ways in which the figure of the “Muslim” has become a category that has surfaced in relation to concerns with racialisation, immigration, national identities, democracy, postcoloniality, expressions of sexuality, extremism and radicalisation.⁶ In order to reveal these various layers of “the Muslim question”, it is therefore necessary not only to look into glocal instances of its emergence, but also to trace how categories of race, gender, religion/secularity and sexuality infuse its configuration. Anthropologist Peter van der Veer, for example, has assessed the “*Islam-questie*” (in English: “Islam-issue”) by looking at the historical relationship of the Dutch government to its Muslim colonial subjects in Indonesia, from which he argues that that, even today, Muslim migrant and postcolonial communities in the Netherlands face a Dutch government that wants to mould its subjects into good citizens.⁷ For sociologist Nilüfer Göle, “the Muslim question” needs to be understood as based in a contemporary situation in which European democratic states increasingly have to negotiate freedom of religion and the protection of individual autonomy.⁸ In this article, I do not aim to

⁴ Jennifer A. Selby and Lori G. Beaman, “Re-posing the ‘Muslim Question’”, *Critical Research on Religion* 14 (2016): 8–20, p. 8.

⁵ Anne Norton, *On the Muslim Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁶ Selby and Beaman, “Re-posing the ‘Muslim Question’”, p. 10.

⁷ Peter van der Veer, *Islam en het “Beschaafde” Westen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2002), pp. 187–204.

⁸ Nilüfer Göle, *The Daily Lives of Muslims* (London: Zed Books, 2016). p. 253.

present a conclusive answer to what is *really* at stake in current debates about Islam, Muslims and Muslim women. The above discussion of “the Muslim question” is, however, meant to show its glocal multiplicity and conceptual and empirical complexity. My aim here is more modest: I shall explore local instances of the construction of “the Muslim question” but focus mainly on the ways in which female Muslim public figures respond to it. My primary aim is to give attention to the complex ways in which Muslim women establish modes of critique and, relatedly, to theoretically rethink the feminist and critical methodology of “talking back”. As hinted at in the introductory reference to Saleh’s poem, “the Muslim question”, as a politics of representation, is gendered. In many European locations, the oppression of Muslim women by Muslim men and Islamic tradition is “framed as the specific way in which Muslim backwardness and alienness reveals itself”.⁹ This observation makes social theorist Sara Farris question the relation between religion, gender and race: “Arguably, it is not the ‘Muslim Question’ that is feminized but the ‘Woman Question,’ as it were, that is culturalized (or racialized).”¹⁰ On the basis of the above excursion, I argue that the theoretical challenge of thinking through the complex and multilayered gendered connections between secularity, religion, race and postcoloniality – which all inform the emergence of “the Muslim question” – needs more attention than it has received so far.¹¹

Many Muslim female public intellectuals, professionals, artists and activists critique “the Muslim question” by “talking back” in various ways to discourses that consider Islam and Muslims as not belonging to European cultures and societies, or position Islam and Muslims at the margins of it. In this article, I explore various such instances of Muslim women talking back that have recently taken place in the Netherlands and Belgium. I consider these to be glocal cases and, as such, as shedding light on broader Western European discourses and their contestations. First, I analyse two debates organised in the Netherlands by the Amsterdam cultural centre De Balie in February 2017. The first was entitled “*Waarom haten ze ons eigenlijk?*” (“Why Do They [Muslims] Hate Us?”) and focused on the connection between Islam and violence. The second, entitled

⁹ Sara Farris, “From the Jewish Question to the Muslim Question: Republican Rigorism, Culturalist Differentialism and Antinomies of Enforced Emancipation”, *Constellations* 21 (2014), 298–307, p. 304.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹¹ Nella van den Brandt, “Religion, Gender, Race, and Conversion: *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq and *Onderworpen* by Johan Simons and Chokri Ben Chikha”, *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 22 (2019): 191–207.

“*Baas over eigen sluier*” (“In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf”) responded to the first, and the female speakers grappled with issues of Islamophobia, sexism and racism. Next, I explore the 2017 controversy that took place in Belgium concerning Rachida Lamrabet’s artwork about the face-veil ban, after which she was dismissed from her job as a jurist at a governmental human rights institution. I shall show that Muslim women’s counter-voices are multilayered, conveyed through various means and context-dependent, as well as dependent on intersectional marginalised positionalities – and simultaneously point to concerns that go far beyond the geopolitical context of the Netherlands and Belgium.

Thinking through “talking back”

The theorising of “talking back” can be presented by focusing on some of its various dimensions, which include: (1) talking back as developing a marginalised voice, (2) talking back in terms of subjectification, and (3) talking back as related to the issue of epistemology. These dimensions have been addressed from the starting point of different theoretical frameworks, but distinguishing them needs to be seen as an analytical endeavour, since interesting intersections of these dimensions can be found in feminist theory as well as in feminist activism and social movements. In this section, I briefly sketch these three theoretical and conceptual backgrounds to talking back, in order to rethink what it means to critically raise one’s voice, in one way or another, in a context that is discursively shaped by “the Muslim (woman) question”.

The first dimension of “talking back” can be traced to Black feminist theory, and notably to feminist and cultural theorist bell hooks’s book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*,¹² in which hooks conceptualises “back talk” or “talking back” through the terminology of the black community in the south of the US where she grew up. For hooks, talking back is about questioning authority, courage, coming to an own voice and resistance. Not every kind of speaking can be considered talking back, since one can speak without being listened to, or without being taken seriously. Talking back is therefore, according to hooks, equally as much about the effects of speaking, and the conditions through which speaking as an act of risking and daring has emancipatory outcomes. Claiming the right to voice, authorship and authority is in this framework the

¹² bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2015 [South End Press, 1989]).

expression of an individual or a collective movement struggling to shift from object position to becoming subject.¹³ In short, hooks defines talking back as:

... not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act – as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced.¹⁴

Talking back, according to hooks, can be done in different ways: it can be daring to disagree and raise one's voice to an authority figure, while claiming to speak as an equal. But talking back can sometimes also just mean to have one's own opinion. The crucial factor is a critical awareness and a conscious rebellion against dominating authority leading to a transformation of self and society.¹⁵

Such a theorisation of talking back is indebted to the centre-staging of racial/ethnic differences and inequalities by Black feminists, womanists and feminist theorists of colour. Starting from a notion of ethnic, religious, gendered and/or sexual particularity, "talking back" from marginalised positions becomes perceived as a necessary ground from which society and theory can be radically rethought and transformed.¹⁶ It is also indebted to critical pedagogies, notably the work of Paulo Freire and feminist second-wave consciousness raising methods, and their underlying understandings about power, the subject and agency. Freire and his followers formulated "empowerment theory", which has been taken up by critical and feminist pedagogies and social work,¹⁷ a field in which hooks's work also need to be situated.¹⁸ "Empowerment" is here often

¹³ Ibid., pp. 5–18.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, edited by Cheryl Clarke (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]; Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1981); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovitch, 1983); Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond", *The Black Scholar* 26 (1996): 9–17; Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002).

¹⁷ E. Summerson Carr, "Rethinking Empowerment Theory Using a Feminist Lens: The Importance of Process", *Affilia* 18 (2003): 8–20.

¹⁸ See for example: bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994); bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York/London: Routledge, 2003).

understood in terms of “development-models” based on a linear narrative that includes “steps” such as identifying problems, deconstructing problems, social action and further reflection. Also, second-wave feminist theorising and praxis, proclaiming that “the personal is political”, relies on an idea of empowerment as being bolstered by critical reflection leading to action.¹⁹ But, although working on the basis of notions of empowerment by affirming marginalised individual voices and selves leading to diminished power-over and an expansion of choices, possibilities and self-understandings, Black feminists, women of colour and intersectional thinkers have simultaneously complicated any homogenous understanding of talking back. Since the notion of “women” as a homogenous group with similar experiences of oppression and similar needs has been criticised,²⁰ talking back needs to be understood as necessarily particular, multi-directional and context-based. We can find an example of such a specific and situated understanding in the writing of the Moroccan scholar of gender and media Kenza Oumlil.²¹ For her analysis of the poetry of the Palestinian Suheir Hammad, Oumlil defines talking back more narrowly as related to negative stereotypes, which enables her to read Hammad’s poetry as a response to dominant representations of Palestinian and Middle Eastern women. Oumlil assesses Hammad’s poetry for its resignification of dominant gendered portrayals, and for the creation of a feminist archive of missing stories.

A second dimension of the theorising of “talking back” needs to be traced to Althusserian and Butlerian theorisations of the subject and subject formation. Two recent writings emerging from Dutch empirical research consider talking back to be fruitful ground for exploring the relationships between speech, subject formation and agency. Sociologist Sarah Bracke analyses the responses of young, highly educated, pious Muslim women belonging to the Turkish diaspora and the Milli Görüş movement in the Netherlands to stereotypes of and allegations against Muslim women in public debates.²² She turns to an Althusserian account of interpellation and reads this account through a Butlerian lens to think through the connection between the

¹⁹ Carr, “Rethinking”.

²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003). Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–1299.

²¹ Kenzia Oumlil, “‘Talking Back’: The Poetry of Suheir Hammad”, *Feminist Media Studies* 13 (2013): 850–859.

²² Sara Bracke, “Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands”, *Feminist Review* 98 (2011): 28–46.

subject, ideology and discourse. Bracke sketches the classical Althusserian account of interpellation about the subject as coming into being through the interpellation, or “call”, of a single ideology. More poststructuralist accounts, however, theorise the subject as emerging from a multiplicity of interpellations. In the case of Muslim female subjects, important calls occur from both the Islamic discursive tradition and contemporary dominant discourse about Islam in the Netherlands. Moreover, “public debate” is not univocal, but rather polyvocal, multilayered and contradictory. Exploring different modes of talking back to dominant scripts about Muslim women then becomes a way of understanding different possible becomings of Muslim female subjects. Bracke thus defines subject formation as taking place “at the intersection of interpellations emanating from different discursive contexts and their instances of authorities”.²³ Such an approach then considers ways of talking back, and the subjectivities they foster, as always relying on the terms of both the traditions they are part of and the debates they cannot escape – even if the relationship being established is one of negation or silence. Bracke explains silence as a way of talking back and a specific kind of subject formation as follows: “Fearing the ways in which their speech would be (un)heard and could be instrumentalized, the young women suggested that often it was better to remain silent. ‘Talking back’ is indeed a complicated matter.”²⁴

A second recent analysis taking a similar approach to “talking back” is anthropologist Martijn de Koning’s article about anti-Islamophobia initiatives in the Netherlands.²⁵ De Koning relates anti-Islamophobia activism to the broader framework of the racialisation of Muslims, arguing that the concept of race/racialisation enables a fuller understanding of how Muslims have increasingly become the unacceptable “Other”. He outlines how the racialisation of Muslims in the Netherlands from the 1980s onwards is taking place in political and public debates and policy-making through ideas about culture, origin, kinship and secular and liberal values,²⁶ and raises the question about Muslims’ agency. What are the options for claiming a voice in the context of the construction of “the Muslim other”? Here, Althusser’s notion of interpellation is brought in. De Koning suggests that, within this field of subjection, subjectivation and objectification, Muslims can

²³ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 43–44.

²⁵ Martijn de Koning, “‘You Need to Present a Counter-Message’: The Racialisation of Dutch Muslims and Anti-Islamophobia Initiatives”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 5 (2016): 170–189, pp. 2–6.

²⁶ de Koning, “‘You Need’”, pp. 174–179.

claim their voice. Consequently, this is the field in which Muslims' anti-Islamophobia activism takes place. Like Bracke, de Koning considers the raising of their voice by Muslims as necessarily dependent on the political and public debates and policies that shape the conditions for speech and action. In de Koning's understanding, Muslims are subjected to different types of interpellation. He analyses anti-Islamophobia initiatives as mainly responding to what anthropologist Ghassan Hage calls non-interpellation and negative interpellation:²⁷ the first referring to the individual's experience of feeling ignored or being made invisible; and the second to hypervisibility processes that make racialised subjects intensely visible as objects of the state and public fear.²⁸ Anti-Islamophobia initiatives are modes of talking back that counter non-interpellation by making Islamophobia visible, and/or reject negative interpellation. De Koning proceeds by showing how this is done: by promoting the term Islamophobia, reporting Islamophobic incidents and raising awareness about the existence of Islamophobia.²⁹ He concludes that talking back through anti-Islamophobia work is a complex endeavour: it challenges the racialisation of Muslims but does not seem to be able to challenge the more structurally entrenched layers of racialisation.

A third and final dimension of theories of talking back that I shall briefly discuss here is related to the issue of epistemology. This dimension has been particularly developed by feminist literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who has often been considered, together with Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, as one of the founding scholars of postcolonial studies.³⁰ In her ground-breaking essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?',³¹ she poses questions about whose voices are (not) being heard, and why. Spivak discusses the nineteenth-century controversy between the British colonisers and the Indian colonised about the practice of sati, that is burning widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. Spivak concludes that neither the colonisers nor the colonised allowed women – the victims of this practice – to speak. Both the British and the Indian texts represent women in a way that enables them to claim that they have them on their side. The fact that the women themselves remain unheard leads Spivak to reflect on whether the subaltern in such contexts of

²⁷ Ghassan Hage, "The Affective Politics of Racial Mis-Interpellation", *Theory, Culture & Society* 27/7–8 (2010): 112–129.

²⁸ De Koning, "You Need", p. 180.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 183–188.

³⁰ Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³¹ G. Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 67–111.

misrepresentation can ever speak. This awareness means, for one, that, because we must take the subaltern seriously, we cannot speak for her, since, no matter how well intentioned, it could lead only to further damage. And second, it means that, while the subaltern may speak, she cannot be heard, because her words or actions will necessarily be interpreted in light of dominant discourses that misrepresent her. Or, as Spivak famously put it,

If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. [...] Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.³²

However, it must be emphasised that, in her later work, Spivak took a more positive view of the subaltern’s position, arguing that in the contemporary globalised world, s/he is no longer entirely cut off from lines of access to the centre.³³ Current postcolonial feminist scholarship continues to build on the questions raised by Spivak. Feminist postcolonial philosopher Nikita Dhawan, for example, critically unravels the position of postcolonial theory as well as of migrant and postcolonial communities in Europe.³⁴ Dhawan encountered discussions about the applicability of postcolonial theory to the German context, and related proposals that individuals and communities with migrant backgrounds can be considered subalterns, who cannot be heard by the hegemonic dominant culture. In such discussions, intellectuals belonging to migrant communities often become perceived as spokespersons for the margins. In dialogue with Spivak’s work, Dhawan argues against this “ubalternising” of mainstream migrants to the north, since they are very much situated inside capitalist structures, as agents and not simply as victims. She concludes, therefore, by acknowledging the everyday experiences of discrimination and exploitation of migrants, refugees and people living in exile, but also by

³² Ibid., pp. 47, 84.

³³ Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 187.

³⁴ Nikita Dhawan, “Can the Subaltern Speak German? And Other Risky Questions: Migrant Hybridism versus Subalternity”, *Translate* (2007), <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/dhawan-strands01en> (last accessed 6 June 2019).

calling for “radicalising migrant activism” with an eye on transnational alliance politics.³⁵ Endorsing Dhawan’s warning, I refrain in this article from uncritically subalternising Muslim women in Western Europe – not only because their position cannot be described as subaltern in the Spivakian sense, but also because it would not help us to understand Muslim women’s modes of critique. While Muslim women’s voices and experiences might often indeed be misrepresented or appropriated, Muslim women’s talking back to “the Muslim question” does not depend on a self-understanding as subaltern, but is instead underlined by the subversive perception that they are rightfully at home in Europe, notwithstanding the specific histories and practices they bring to it.

In what follows, I relate my notion of talking back to the above described Althusserian and Butlerian theorisations of the subject and subject formation, maintaining the suggestion that the construction of counter-voices always somehow relies on the terms of the debates they intend to challenge. At the same time, being indebted to the thinking of Black feminists, women of colour and intersectional theorists, I also see voices from the margin as potentially resistant and able to envision alternative modes of agency, identity and subjectivity.

Talking back in multiple ways

In this section, I focus on various moments in which “the Muslim question” becomes crystallised in public discourse about Islam, Muslims, Muslim women, violence and veiling. In these moments, it is not only “the Muslim question” that emerges, but also voices that critically talk back. The analysis will provide insight into the ways in which Muslim female voices express agency situated in their specific contexts, professions and social positionings.

A case from the Netherlands: setting up “the Muslim question”

³⁵ Dhawan, “Can the Subaltern”.

The first moment I shall explore is set in recent public debate in the Netherlands. De Balie, a well-known cultural centre in Amsterdam, organised two events at the beginning of 2017 during which the social-political and religious position of Islam and Muslims was discussed. The first event, “Why Do They Hate Us?”, focused on Muslims as perpetrators of violence and aggression and the supposed role of Islam in Muslims’ behaviour. The second event, “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf”, which took place only two weeks after the first, turned out to be an emotional response to the first and an instance of Muslim women intellectuals and artists talking back. De Balie filmed both events and posted them at Vimeo and Youtube, as it does for many of its events.³⁶ The contents of these events therefore reached and were discussed by a much larger audience through traditional and social media. In what follows, I analyse how the first event creates and reinforces “the Muslim question” by presenting specific notions of Islam and Muslims. I shall show that, as the event unfolds, “the Muslim question” is set up through polyvocal representations and understandings of what or who constitutes the “real” problem regarding the issue of the presence of Islam and Muslims in Western Europe.

On 23 January 2017, De Balie organised the launch of the book, *Why Do They Hate Us? (Waarom haten ze ons eigenlijk?)*, edited by Frits Bosch and published in 2016.³⁷ Professor of Law Paul Cliteur, one of the contributing authors, started off his introduction to the book by referring to economist Frits Bosch as a “concerned civilian who contacted me after the terrorist attacks in Brussels”. The book title cites the well-known Dutch TV-presenter Jeroen Pauw, who in his talkshow in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 22 March 2016 in Brussels (Belgium) at the international airport Zaventem and the subway station Maalbeek, posed the question “Why do they hate us?”. The book, Cliteur explained, aims at providing answers to this question. Its authors intend to provide insights into the terrorist attacks, but also more generally into contemporary issues involving Islam and Muslims world-wide. Cliteur situated the book as engaging with a focus on (political) Islam, explicitly excluding other concerns that take majority–minority dynamics and postcolonial reflections as a starting point to think about Islam and Muslims in European contexts.

³⁶ “Waarom haten ze ons eigenlijk?”, Programma van stichting werkelijkheid in perspectief, uploaded by De Balie at Vimeo on 23 January 2017 at 12:40 PM EST, <https://vimeo.com/200700709> (last accessed 8 June 2018); “Baas over eigen sluier: Een avond voorbij de clichés”, uploaded by De Balie on 4 February 2017 at 4:46 PM EST, <https://vimeo.com/202566458> (last accessed 8 June 2018)

³⁷ Frits Bosch (ed.), *Waarom haten ze ons eigenlijk?* (Groningen: De Blauwe Tijger, 2016).

The book launch then moved to two lectures and a general discussion involving the audience. The first lecture was given by Wim van Rooy, a Belgian Germanist, philosopher and public intellectual. Van Rooy started by arguing that, after their arrival in Western European societies, Muslims have had to cope with the fact that they belong to a minority that embraces a religious tradition, Islam, which tells them Muslims are ultimately superior to non-Muslims – a situation that causes a contradictory psycho-social condition for Muslims. Second, he defines Islam as a totalitarian system based upon the idea of predestination. Van Rooy uses this definition of Islam to explain three things: the lethargy of Muslim young men who do not invest in their studies or career; the impossibility of the reformation of Islam despite the struggles of those who want to change things from within; and the fundamental illegibility of Islamic frameworks to non-Muslims. He concludes that those who want to change Islam from within will ultimately always get stuck and fail because of the inherent impossibility of the reformation of a totalitarian system (*“Islam komt altijd terug op”*) (28:00min). The second lecture was provided by Halim el Madkouri, a Dutch socialist politician and former employee of FORUM, a Dutch civil society institute with expertise in multiculturalism that was disbanded in 2014. El Madkouri started by problematising the title of the book, *Why Do They Hate Us?*, by posing questions about “they” and “us”. He noted that it is a mistake to generalise Muslims and responded to van Rooy’s claim that Muslims have to “cope” with their minority position in Western European contexts by referring to recent developments in the history of Islamic thought in the Middle East, arguing that Muslim scholars have a long tradition of reflecting on inequality and the “lagging behind” of Middle Eastern societies and people compared with European powers and people. He also responded to van Rooy’s notion of Islam as a homogenous and totalitarian system by pointing to the need to distinguish between different types of Islam/Muslims (“Muslims versus Salafists/Islamists”) and the historicity of the emergence of the Wahhabi Islam that inspires contemporary Salafi Muslims. He argues for respecting the rules of law and democracy that should give Muslims equal opportunities and possibilities, while excluding any kind of dialogue with Salafi Muslims. After these two lectures, a one-hour discussion took place in which the audience participated. The moderator emphasised that, since the first part of the book launch thematised contemporary “problems” with Muslims’ failure to integrate and their violent behaviour, the discussion should now shift to thinking about “solutions”.

The ensuing discussion revolved around the need to focus on radical Islam, the integration of Muslims, and the supposedly violent behaviour of Muslims in specific neighbourhoods. A woman in the audience took the floor to point to what she considered to be a problematic demographic: the presence of too many Muslims in Western countries. The number of Muslims should be decreased, she continued, by deporting Muslims in order for the remaining Muslims “to tone down” (01:40:00min). Van Rooy noted that, in order to find a solution to the problems of Islam/Muslim in Europe, international treaties about human rights should be broken. He subsequently argued for the need to limit Muslims’ religious freedoms and to close the borders to Muslim migrants, since Islam can never integrate within liberal law and society.

This first event at De Balie received fierce responses. The Vimeo and Youtube posting of the event and its transmission to a larger audience generated increased attention and controversy. The critical opinion-making website Joop, an initiative of the Dutch liberal-leftist public broadcasting agencies VARA and BNN, played an important role in fuelling responses by creating a compilation of the event, entitled “Plain Hatred against Muslims in De Balie” (“*Onvervalste Moslimhaat in De Balie*”), and posting it online.³⁸ Not only the content of what was said during the event, but also the fact that it was De Balie that hosted it, became important elements of the controversy. De Balie is traditionally known as a critical and leftist cultural centre, and leftist politicians, journalists, public intellectuals and activists were angered by what they felt was the (further) “intrusion” of Islamophobic and racist rhetoric into progressive leftist thinking. For example, Rutger Groot Wassink, an Amsterdam Green-Left politician, commented during the Amsterdam city council meeting of 25 January 2017 that he was “concerned about the normalising of racism in the Netherlands. This is not normal, and should be addressed.”³⁹ Joop.nl described the event as similar to a “thirties Bavarian beer party” (“*een Beierse bielkelder uit de jaren dertig*”), thereby associating it not only with conservativeness, provinciality and pub talk, but also with the so-called *Bierkellerputsch* of 8–9 November 1923, the night during which Adolf Hitler attempted a coup in München, Germany – all in contrast to the kind of debate that is supposedly

³⁸ Joop.nl, “Onvervalste Moslimhaat in De Balie”, posted on 24 January 2017, <https://joop.bnnvara.nl/nieuws/onvervalste-moslimhaat-in-de-balie> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

³⁹ Sheila Kamerman and Freek Schravensande, “Pas na het Islamdebat in De Balie ging het echt los”, NRC, 26 January 2017, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/01/26/pas-na-debat-in-de-balie-ging-het-echt-los-6402053-a1542967> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

usually held by cosmopolitan leftist intellectuals. De Balie was thus seen as “betraying” its ambition to provide a space for social-political critical perspectives, culture and art.

In terms of the ways in which “the Muslim question” is set up and reinforced in public debates, this event at De Balie can be understood as an instance of polyvocal representations of what constitutes the “real” problem regarding the presence of Islam and Muslim in Western Europe. A first mode of representation is the construction of the perception of Muslims as lacking religious and moral agency in the face of Islam as a totalitarian system. The notion of Islam as a totalitarian system turns Muslims into subjects who do not fit into European democratic societies and are potentially violent – a situation Muslims themselves cannot fight against except by escaping Islam altogether. Such renderings of Muslims and Islam consequently enables differential treatment of Muslims – to which van Rooy’s calls for discrimination attest. A second mode is the representation of a specific category of Muslims, that is Salafi-oriented Muslims, as the real problem that needs to be addressed, which serves as a strategy to counter the perception of Islam as a totalitarian system and Muslims as its dupes. Although el Madkouri did respond to the homogenous rendering of Islam and its negative portrayal of Muslims, he set up a problematic binary of “good” versus “bad” Muslims,⁴⁰ or “moderate” versus “extremist” Muslims, in which Salafi-oriented Muslims figure as outside the frameworks of rational conversation and potentially dangerous. In this way, el Madkouri arguably redefines “the Muslim question” and restricts it to an exceptional group of Salafi/Wahhabi Muslims. The second part of the event featured further discussion between the two discursive constructions of “the Muslim question”.

Western European governments and their policy-making operate primarily on the basis of the more restricted understanding of what constitutes the problem of the presence of Islam and Muslims. A minority among Muslims are believed to be victims of “extremist tendencies”, and this minority of “bad Muslims” should be disciplined through repression (incarceration) and prevention (deradicalisation).⁴¹ Since the surveillance of Muslims has increased in various Western European settings after 9/11 but especially since

⁴⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press Doubleday, 2004).

⁴¹ Nadia Fadil, *Tegen radicalisering: Pleidooi voor een postkoloniaal Europa: Paul Verbraekenlezing 2017* (Brussel: VUBPress, 2017).

terrorist attacks in places such as Paris and Brussels,⁴² critical scholars have condemned declarations that Islam is an “extremist ideology” that inevitably leads its subjects to violence, misogyny and homophobia⁴³ – whether articulated by politicians or academic and public intellectuals – for creating and fuelling Islamophobic and racist sentiments.

Muslim women talking back

The second event was not planned to be a response to the first event in De Balie, but did become one. “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf” took place on 4 February 2017, two weeks after “Why Do They Hate Us?”. The event’s title conveys the organisers’ intention that the entire occasion would be an opportunity for talking back to dominant discourses about Muslim women and veiling practices. However, the evening became just as much a critique of the “Why Do They Hate Us?” event. The organisers and participants in “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf” were shocked by what had happened at exactly the same location two weeks earlier, and were angry and saddened by the calls for discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims. Some of the evening’s speakers said they had thought about cancelling their participation in the event, but eventually decided to attend. These speakers explicitly favoured talking back over withdrawal in silence.⁴⁴ Since both the organisers and the speakers referred to the “Why Do They Hate Us?” event and expressed the anger, pain and sadness they felt, “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf” can be considered an evening of talking back to the earlier instance of the polyvocal construction of “the Muslim question”. I was present at this event as a member of the audience, and experienced the shock, anger and pain that were tangible throughout the evening.

After a short introduction by organiser and moderator Mirthe Frese, “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf” was divided in two parts: the first a dance performance, and the second a panel discussion with Muslim women intellectuals from various professional backgrounds. The dance performance was created by director Miranda Lakerveld of World Opera Lab in collaboration with Muslim women from the Amsterdam

⁴² De Koning, ““You Need””; Fadil, *Tegen radicalisering*; Francesco Ragazzi, “Towards ‘Policed Multiculturalism’? Counter-Radicalization in France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom”, *Les Etudes du CERI* 206 bis (2014).

⁴³ Richard Jackson, “Constructing Enemies: ‘Islamic Terrorism’ in Political and Academic Discourse”, *Government and Opposition* 42 (2007): 394–426; Saba Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror”, in *Gendering Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities*, edited by Hanna Herzog and Ann Braude (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 193–215; Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ Bracke, “Subjects”, pp. 43–44.

neighbourhood De Baarsjes as a way to channel their frustrations about and talk back to the French burkini debates in summer 2016,⁴⁵ about which they felt that the discussions about Muslim female (beach) dress had taken place without including Muslim women as conversation partners. The performance, entitled “Dance of Seven Veils”, referred to the story of Salomé, the stepdaughter of Herod, who, according to the Biblical story, tempted Herod by dancing for him and demanded the head of John the Baptist as her reward. “Dance of Seven Veils” took up the theme of the veil, and the actors developed different narratives in each of which a different cultural and social way of dealing with the headscarf was made central: the myth of the goddess Innanaa; a story of the burkini-wearing woman called Siam on a French beach, where she was ordered to undress; a story of a mother who secretly wishes her daughter to wear a headscarf; the Biblical story of Salomé and John the Baptist; and the perspective of Khadija from Amsterdam West, who feels she is criticised by other Muslims for not wearing her headscarf properly, while her daughter is discriminated against by a non-Muslim shopkeeper for wearing a headscarf. Thus, by taking up various cultural understandings of the veil, and women’s social experiences with veiling, the performance conveyed the message of the multiple issues associated with veiling: a single religious or cultural meaning or social experience simply does not exist.

The second part of the evening consisted of a panel discussion with Muslim women intellectuals with various professional skills and ethnic backgrounds: researcher and interfaith dialogue activist Nora Asrami; Islamic scholar Anne Dijk; TV programme-maker and journalist Naeeda Aurangzeb, and theatre maker and actor Nazmiye Oral. The moderator started the discussion by asking each of the panelists to say “a few words about how you relate to the current political climate as a woman and Muslim, as a Muslim woman”. In response, the speakers spoke about non-Muslims’ increasingly negative perceptions of Muslims; how to find a critical voice as Muslim women to deal with inequality among Muslim communities; and how, where and when to dialogue and/or provide critique, or remain silent. They all spoke about their own experiences,

⁴⁵ An van Raemdonck, Chia Longman, Amal Miri, Katrien de Graeve, H.P. van den Brandt, Tine Brouckaert, Eline Huygens, An Gordier, Yasmina Akhandaf, Sarah Bracke, Merel Terlien, Evelien Geerts, Fatma Arikoglu, Robin van Royen, Isle Hackethal, Anya Topolski, Nadia Fadil, Bieke Purnelle, Ciska Hoet, and Ico Maly, “Een boerkiniverbod voedt enkel de identiteitspolitiek en helpt niemand”, *De Tijd*, 1 September 2016, <https://www.tijd.be/dossier/krant/Een-boerkiniverbod-voedt-enkel-de-identiteitspolitiek-en-helpt-niemand/9803826> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

struggles, victories and set-backs. Aurangzeb, for example, related how she felt forced always to engage in talking back to multiple audiences with various interests, and how this could make her feel tired and lonely:

One may be working at an organisation that keeps silent about domestic violence because of the power and influence of one of its male members, and also because [of the assumption that] “we are all Muslims”. And when my Pakistani family speaks in a derogatory way about Afghan refugees, I cannot shut my mouth. When you believe in something, you do not need an institute or employer, but it becomes a way of life, it becomes who you are. I learn to be silent at times, and I learn to show what I believe in just through a way of being. This means I can never take a break. And it also means loneliness. [...] When larger themes are at issue, then often smaller issues are silenced. But they are as important. I want to determine what is urgent for me, instead of running after the current headlines. [...] But the Royal Dutch Airlines, who do not want to take Muslims to the US anymore [complying with US President Donald Trump’s announcement of a “Muslim ban”, January 2017], gives me a stomach ache! How come they are “just doing their job”?! (39:30-43:00min, translation mine).

These two events at De Balie provide insight into how “the Muslim question” is being constructed as well as being criticised in public discourse. The analysis of “Why Do They Hate Us?” demonstrates that “the Muslim question” was set up on the basis of the perception either that Islam is a totalitarian system and Muslims lack moral agency and are potentially violent, or that a minority of Muslims are beyond the frameworks of rational conversation and are potentially violent. In other words, either *all* or *some* Muslims are considered to be “improperly” religious and “improper” citizens, and therefore “utterly Other” and in need of surveillance and disciplining. In “In Charge of One’s Own Headscarf”, Muslim women deliberately took the floor to talk back. The quotation from Aurangzeb illustrates how talking back is done vis-à-vis non-Muslims, but also how it addresses Muslims and specific ethnic communities: it focuses on various (intersecting) inequalities, and is conducted through diverging strategies, ranging from explicit argumentation, silence and/or trying to set a

good example.⁴⁶ During the panel conversation, all the speakers formulated thoughts about what talking back looks like, starting from their own professions, and from different ethnic backgrounds (Pakistani, Turkish, Moroccan). Religious positionings in terms of being born into a Muslim family or being a convert also matter. When the evening's discussion turned to the issue of women's position in Islam and within Muslim communities, Anne Dijk critiqued the fact that she as a convert was often questioned about this issue. "I am very often asked about it [women in Islam]. But as I see it, God is the greatest, and all individuals are equal to each other. Strong women throughout Islamic history inspire me."

Talking back in the context of "the Muslim question" seems to be linked here to Althusserian-Butlerian notions of the subject and subject formation, and its related understanding of the inescapability of interpellation. The panelists at the second event felt forced to relate to the first – they only had to choose *how* to do so: by explicit talking back or by remaining silent. On the other hand, the talking back by means of the dance performance in the face of public debates about and regulations of headscarves and burkinis seems more related to the theorising of Black feminists and women of colour by holding on to the belief that speaking out, affirming religious and cultural differences, and thematising intersectional positionings can help to change situations of inequality.

The above analysis of "In Charge of One's Own Headscarf" demonstrates that Muslim women's critique is based upon a multi-faceted approach and directed at multiple audiences. In what follows, I explore another example of Muslim women talking back, and demonstrate further how, in the case of Rachida Lamrabet, talking back is enabled through specific professional positionings (art, writing and law), and is tied to intersectional marginalised social positionings (ethnicity, religion and gender).

A case from Belgium: back and forth from the margin to the centre

In 2016, the Royal Flemish Theatre (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg – KVS) invited the artist and lawyer Rachida Lamrabet to participate in a transatlantic theatre project set up by the Washington Goethe-Institut

⁴⁶ See also Margaretha van Es's research about Norwegian and Dutch Muslim women's strategic responses to negative stereotypes about Islam, Muslims and Muslim women, and the consequences of this for Muslim women's self-presentation and self-understanding. Margaretha van Es, *Stereotypes and Self-Representations of Women with a Muslim Background: The Stigma of Being Oppressed* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

about the cultural and juridical meaning of privacy. The theatre project's goal was to establish an American-European artistic and cultural dialogue about the concept privacy. Lamrabet accepted the invitation and produced the short film "Deburkanisation" ("*Deburkanisatie*").⁴⁷ The film centre stages a fictive persona, a woman wearing a face veil, who reflects on the Belgian law that has banned the face veil from public spaces since 2011, and its effects on her personal life. The film touches upon the gendered aspects and individual experience of religious traditions, human rights and law, and the political, social and juridical position of religious and ethnic minorities.⁴⁸ Two weeks after the well-known Flemish journal *Knack* covered Lamrabet's short film,⁴⁹ she was fired from her position as a jurist at UNIA, the Belgian Federal Institute for Equal Opportunities – a position she had held for 15 years. It is important to note here that UNIA is a human rights institute that is neither separated from nor independent of political parties: it hosts representatives of various political parties in a collaboration, aiming at the establishment and protection of human rights. The firing of Lamrabet by UNIA caused a public controversy,⁵⁰ with scholars and intellectuals protesting against what they considered to be a politically motivated move to silence critical art projects.⁵¹ In support of Lamrabet, on 20 June 2017, the KVS organised an event entitled "Rachida Speaks Out!" ("*Rachida spreekt!*"), during which various public intellectuals from fields such as human rights law, art, literature and academic research (Eva Brems, Joke van Leeuwen, Michael de Cock, Nadia Fadil, Annelies Verbeke) critically analysed the Lamrabet case and protested against UNIA's treatment of her.⁵² At the end of 2017, Lamrabet published her memoir

⁴⁷ The short film "Project Deburkanisation" by Rachida Lamrabet can be seen here: <https://www.mo.be/opinie/project-deburkanisation-van-rachida-lamrabet-neemt-onze-gangbare-controledrang-op-de-korrel> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

⁴⁸ For critical analyses of face veil bans in France and Belgium, see Eva Brems (ed.), *The Experience of Face Veil Wearers in Europe and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Eva Brems, Jogchum Vrielink, and Sailam Ouald Chaib, "Uncovering French and Belgian Face Covering Bans", *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 2 (2013): 69–99.

⁴⁹ Han Renard, "Rachida Lamrabet: 'Boerkaverbod is een verregaande inbreuk op de vrijheid van vrouwen'", *Knack*, 21 March 2017, <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/rachida-lamrabet-boerkaverbod-is-een-verregaande-inbreuk-op-de-vrijheid-van-vrouwen/article-normal-829849.html> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

⁵⁰ Lieven Desmet, "Boerka-uitspraken fataal voor Lamrabet", *De Morgen*, 2 April 2017, <https://www.demorgen.be/binnenland/rachida-lamrabet-ontslagen-bij-unia-bdbfed63/> (last accessed 8 June 2018); Eva Berghmans, "Rachida Lamrabet, ontketend: 'We worden een samenleving die mensenrechten als voorwaardelijk beschouwt'", *De Standaard*, 10 June 2017, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170609_02918690 (last accessed 8 June 2018).

⁵¹ *Knack*, "Reacties ontslag Rachida Lamrabet: 'Van mening verschillen, het mag blijkbare niet meer'", *Knack*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/reacties-ontslag-rachida-lamrabet-van-mening-verschillen-het-mag-blijkbare-niet-meer/article-normal-835667.html> (last accessed 8 June 2017); Thomas Decreus, "Twijfelt er nog iemand aan of N-VA een autoritaire partij is?", *De Wereld Morgen*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/04/03/twijfelt-er-nog-iemand-aan-of-n-va-een-autoritaire-partij-is> (last accessed 8 June 2018); Jeroen Olyslaegers and Ico Maly, "Wij willen niet dat mensen met een mening opnieuw loslopend wild worden", petition published in *Knack*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/wij-willen-niet-dat-mensen-met-een-mening-opnieuw-loslopend-wild-worden/article-opinion-836061.html> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

⁵² See for information about the KVS "Rachida spreekt" event, see <http://www.kvs.be/nl/rachida-lamrabet-spreekt> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

Keep Silent, Allochton! (Zwijg, allochtoon!) with the leftist Flemish publisher EPO.⁵³ In the memoir, she writes about the short film “Deburkanisation” and about being fired by UNIA as a result of her art, and she analyses the developments by focusing on the notion of freedom of speech, power, identity, art and women’s bodies.

The case can be seen as including various moments of talking back as well as the disciplining of talking back: the film was a critical response to the Belgian 2011 face veil law; by firing Lamrabet, UNIA attempted to discipline and/or silence her critique; the public outcry by public intellectuals was a talking back to the decision made by UNIA; and in the *Keep Silent, Allochton!* memoir, Lamrabet once again took the stage in order to analyse the case, starting from her own experience and perspective. In the memoir, she describes how she, as an artist and writer, tries to critically intervene in a societal context that is determined by inequalities based upon gender, ethnicity and religion – inequalities that are sometimes alleviated but sometimes strengthened by law and policy-making. For Lamrabet, her skills as an artist and writer, and her belonging to an ethnic and religious minority, enable her to push “other stories” to the fore and to critically talk back to mechanisms of marginalisation. She formulates this intersection of her professional and gendered and ethnic positioning in her mission as follows:

By being an author, I find myself in the midst of society. For me, writing is an act of self-determination, since you place yourself as *an acting and analysing subject* in the world. You share with your readers your interpretation of reality. As a female author, I give attention to realities that are not often in the spotlight. I choose topics that are close to my heart. Often these are situations or people I know intimately, stories that take place in *my world* about people who are not being heard in *the real world*. I push individuals as characters to the fore and make them play a main role, which they in reality would seldom play. I use my artistic freedom *to draw the voice that is at the margin to the centre* of the fiction I write, so that his or her story is put centre stage and the reader may identify with this character and may, or may not, feel empathy for his or her ambitions. But at least you [as a reader] will become

⁵³ Rachida Lamrabet, *Zwijg, allochtoon!* (Berchem: EPO, 2017).

aware that the characters with exotic names and habits are just people. And that their dilemmas and struggles are not so very different from those of the reader. This is a way to make people who are not blood-and-soil-Flemish-people part of our collective narrative, to give them a place in our collective consciousness, because we are from here. *This place is also our place*. It is a noble aspiration to want to give us a voice. But just as white men should not liberate us, no one should give us a voice. We have *our own voice*, we have *our own story*.⁵⁴

This passage reveals the author's self-understanding as a member of a minoritised group in society – a positioning on the basis of which she develops, in the words of the Afro-American poet Audre Lorde, an “outsider within” perspective.⁵⁵ Like Black feminists and women of colour theorists, Lamrabet envisions her own positioning as potentially able to convey “other stories” that imagine alternative modes of agency, identity and subjectivity.

Artistic freedoms are, according to Lamrabet's analysis of the events, unevenly distributed in Belgium. While, according to official jurisprudence, freedom of speech is equally available for all, in practice, artists and authors with a migrant background, and who belong to an ethnic and religious minority, have less access to this principle, or they only receive a platform to speak when it suits majority perceptions and values.⁵⁶ Moreover, when a female artist with a Muslim background creates art that raises questions about dominant perceptions, values and practices that stigmatise and discriminate against minorities, she will be disciplined, Lamrabet contends, for not being the “right” kind of liberated woman. The “right” kind of emancipated woman with a Muslim background sides with the majority culture, and distances or liberates herself from her “Islamic culture” and its macho Muslim men.⁵⁷

According to Lamrabet, talking back thus takes place according to hooks's understanding of it: talking back moves the marginalised individual from an object-position to a subject-position (or, in Lamrabet's words, it creates “an acting and analysing subject”) by gaining for him or her a critical consciousness and voice.

⁵⁴ Lamrabet, *Zwijg*, pp. 151–152, translation and emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

⁵⁶ Lamrabet, *Zwijg*, pp. 92–131.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–145.

However, hooks also points to the conditions of talking back: the challenge for minoritised women is “to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard”.⁵⁸ The federal institute UNIA attempted to silence Lamrabet’s perspective, but Lamrabet was supported by many critical public intellectuals as well. Questioned by a young girl at a discussion evening in Graz (Austria), Lamrabet pondered whether she would have produced her art had she known what would happen next. As a single mother of four children, she doubts it, given the high price she had to pay.⁵⁹ From an Althusserian and Butlerian perspective, the Lamrabet case could be understood as one in which different discourses about the “proper” kind and place of Muslim women’s religiosity, as well as about the “proper” public attitude of (female) arts and law professionals belonging to ethnic minorities, clashed in a field of unequal power relations. Lamrabet criticised through her artwork the way in which Belgian law interpellates face-veil wearing women as “improperly” religious and “improper” citizens and as such positions face-veil wearing women as the epitome of “the Muslim question”. *Deburkanisation* rejects the assumption that face-veil wearing women need to be either “redeemed”⁶⁰ or “tamed”⁶¹ by law and its enforcement. After being fired, Lamrabet again spoke back through the publication of her memoir – and so remains tied to the terms in which she has been addressed and rejected. She did not consider silence to be a good or satisfying strategy. At the same time, looking back, Lamrabet would not have made the movie had she known what would happen next, preferring silence and relative safety over critique, exposure and rejection.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that, while Muslim women’s public voices often target negative portrayals of Muslim women, their critiques cannot be disentangled from broader engagements with “the Muslim question” as it is constructed and expressed in Western European contexts. While “the Muslim question” generally “call[s] into question the agency, subjectivity and moral equality of Muslims as individuals, as

⁵⁸ hooks, *Talking Back*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Berghmans, “Rachida Lamrabet”.

⁶⁰ Sara Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Duke University Press, 2017).

⁶¹ Nadia Fadil, “Taming the Muslim Woman: Sex, Secularism and ‘Femonationalism’”, SSRIC Blog The Immanent Frame, 24 May 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/05/24/taming-the-muslim-woman/> (last accessed 8 June 2018).

bearers of religious values, and as citizens”,⁶² it needs to be considered as comprising glocal and polyvocal representations of who or what exactly is categorised as the main problem. I have explored two cases of recent mediated instances of controversy about Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium, and focused on the ways in which Muslim female intellectuals and artists respond to public understandings of Islam, Muslims and Muslim women, and the questioning and/or regulation of Muslim women’s veiling practices. Zooming-in at such local events, debates and developments may arguably enable us to put together some of the pieces of the puzzle that is the amalgam of “the Muslim question” in Europe. I have demonstrated the complex ways in which Muslim female intellectuals and artists “talk back”, which is mediated through ethnicity, gender, and born-Muslim and convert positionings. Starting from these case studies to further theorise the feminist methodology of talking back, I have argued that talking back needs to be understood as related to different theories of power and the subject at the same time. While the Althusserian-Butlerian concept of interpellation helps to explain the ways in which Muslim women feel forced to relate, in one way or another, to public discourses about Islam and Muslims, Black feminist and women of colour theories and practices of raising one’s voice reveal how Muslim women continue to hope that talking back from their intersectional positionings might make difference. The analysis of Dutch and Belgian occasions of Muslim women talking back not only reveals Muslim women’s agency and resilience, but also importantly points to a crucial aspect of “the Muslim question” – which is its inescapability.

Having outlined and theorised moments and strategies of talking back to “the Muslim question”, this article hopes to contribute to critical investigations and deconstructions of gendered, racialised and sexualised discourses on Islam and Muslim minorities in West European contexts. The counter-voices discussed in this article, with their feminist and antiracist attitudes, their political, social, artistic and juridical critiques, and their dissection of understandings of “Islam”, are examples of what locally situated modes of talking back look like. Talking back may crucially enable and support the coming into being of critical consciousness and counter-positionings. However, subjects talking back may suffer responses that aim at disciplining or surveillance, negation or rejection. For that reason, whether strategies of explicit talking back or silence are

⁶² Gianni, “Muslims’ Integration”, p. 23.

taken up, both strategies can be drenched in frustration at the impossibility of escaping “the Muslim question” and the fear of becoming hyper-visible or invisible. But both are also dense with multiple desires – for the possibility of other kinds of stories, identities and (inter)subjectivities, as well as for social, political and juridical systems that take alternative modes of voice, agency and identity seriously.