

**EMBODIED AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN *POLITICS OF PIETY*:
REFORMULATING AGENCY FOR AN INCLUSIVE TRANSNATIONAL
FEMINISM**

“I have come to believe that a certain amount of self-scrutiny and skepticism is essential regarding the certainty of my own political commitments, when trying to understand the lives of others who do not necessarily share these commitments”¹

Mahmood’s provocative critique of secular and liberal frameworks in *Politics of Piety* revolves around the thesis that freedom is not a universal end, but rather a product of a prescriptive project undertaken by a particular political imagination whose truth came to be assumed in a particular historical context.² She demonstrates this by a close examination of women’s mosque movement in Egypt, based on which she suggests, in Selim’s words, that “agency can be fully articulated in an embodied ethical practice,”³ and thus, “there is no *inherent* reason why women must resist their oppression.”⁴ Hence, by historicizing agency and underscoring cultural specificity, Mahmood’s account resists universalization of the desire for freedom, by way of exposing the limitations of its applicability.

There have been two main, and at times overlapping, strands of reading this project, both of which seem to worry feminists for different reasons. One tendency is to read it as a radical call for contextualization, that we must pay close attention to the historical specificities in order to give an account of the significance of certain practices within the

¹ Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. xi.

² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 1-10.

³ Selim, Samah. “Book Review: ‘Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject’” (online source)

⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

given context.⁵ In other words, categories that acquired their meaning in a specific historical and political context fail to be useful for us to measure up the practices that take place in another context. An immediate feminist worry that stems from such reading is the problem of cultural relativism.⁶ Another tendency is to take Mahmood's criticism as a call for radical change in feminist conceptions of agency and dissociation of feminism from progressive politics.⁷ For this reading, the feminist worry is expressed with puzzlement, if not resentment, as to how such view could have anything to do with feminism. Taken seriously, Mahmood's argument seem at best irrelevant, at worst contradictory to what feminism can hope to achieve.⁸

These two strands of reading come together in their agreement that Mahmood's account is fruitless for feminism when pushed to its limits. In this paper, I will argue otherwise. A redefinition of agency by way of historicizing it is promising for transnational feminism insofar as it offers a capacious notion that is attentive to particular experiences (and the particularity of those experiences). So long as we read Mahmood's account as opening up the notion of agency to accommodate the complexities of experience that are irreducible to 'resistance', that are not only relevant, but indispensably valuable, we can articulate this project as a reformulation of agency that offers a basis for cultural translation. I will demonstrate this first by presenting an overview of Mahmood's anthropological study, and then lay out the ways in which Mahmood has been read by feminists and how these readings map onto larger debates about transnational feminism and agency. Finally, I will give a

⁵ Those who read Mahmood in this way include: Sindre Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," (28-54); Samah Selim, "Book Review," Stathis Gourgouris, "Antisecularist Failures: A Counterresponse to Saba Mahmood," (455-456); Peter Van der Veer, "Embodiment, Materiality, and Power," (809-818).

⁶ Several readings of Mahmood bring up accusations of cultural relativism, including Selim "Book Review," Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," Waggoner, "Irony, Embodiment, and the 'Critical Attitude': Engaging Saba Mahmood's Critique of Secular Morality."

⁷ For such reading see: Julius Bautista, "The Meta-Theory of Piety: Reflections on the Work of Saba Mahmood," (75-83).

⁸ Sindre Bangstad (in "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," 42-43) and Peter Van der Veer (in "Embodiment, Materiality, and Power," 811) brought up this concern.

reading of Mahmood's project as underscoring the complexities of experience, which becomes especially salient in her discussion of an embodied practice of ethics. I will then argue that this more nuanced notion of agency is fruitful for feminism so long as we are willing to pay attention to the ways in which experiences can be translated across cultures.

If we read Mahmood's project in this way, we can address the problems identified within Mahmood's account, by way of demonstrating that this is not necessarily a project which gives leeway to cultural relativism, but rather one that is amenable to cultural translation. Further, far from being irrelevant to feminism, by taking up *Politics of Piety* as an attempt to articulate a more capacious notion of agency, we can urge our politics to attest to the experiences that have previously been omitted by a restrictive framework.

Agential Practices in the Women's Mosque Movement

At the outset, Mahmood notes that the women actively involved in the mosque movement in Egypt "occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status."⁹ The participants of such movements, movements that have "come to be associated with terms such as fundamentalism, the subjugation of women, social conservatism, reactionary atavism, cultural backwardness,"¹⁰ exhibit a dilemma for the feminist analyst: "[W]omen are seen to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority."¹¹ That is to say, women's participation in such movements transforms the public sphere as women assert their presence, yet in committing to certain patriarchal narratives about 'woman's virtue' (and Mahmood suggests three: "shyness, modesty, and humility") they seem to reproduce the very

⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 4-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

structures upholding their own subordination. She notes that although the ‘false consciousness thesis’ was dropped after the 1960s as an explanation of women’s participation in such movements, feminists “continue to frame the issue in terms of a fundamental contradiction.”¹² They ask, Mahmood writes, “[W]hy would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their ‘own interests and agendas’, especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them?”¹³

Mahmood draws attention to the normativity at work that renders this question not only intelligible, but also necessary. The assumption here that Mahmood sees as detrimental is one that resembles a Weberian disenchantment; that religious commitments ought to disappear with the establishment of modern secular state and its apparatuses. Feminism as a politically prescriptive project is entangled with a liberal/secular framework which takes freedom as a natural universal end, without asking self-reflexively under what historical and political conditions this assumption came to be meaningful. She notes that we would be at fault if we attend only to those cases in which women resist the oppressive structures. By equating agency with autonomy and taking resistance to be its quintessential expression, Mahmood suggests, feminist analyses tend to foreclose a whole range of possibilities that could be of relevance to our understanding of agency. That is to say, resistance is not to be seen as the *only* mode of agency with any kind of significance; and this very assumption arises from a specific historical and political context that disregards its own specificity by taking itself as universal.¹⁴ The women’s mosque movement in Egypt negates this assumption, according to Mahmood, by way of exposing the contingency of beliefs such as “that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom,” or “that we all somehow seek to

¹² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mahmood also notes that this tendency is prevalent not only in Western feminist analyses, but also those in the Third World.

assert our autonomy when allowed to do so,” or “that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them.”¹⁵

Feminist Reception of Mahmood’s Project: Problem of Cultural Relativism

Mahmood’s attempt of historicizing agency in this way is applauded by a number of feminists as a compelling critique of Eurocentricism; yet at the same time, it is received as an unsettling claim due to its dangerous proximity to cultural relativism and essentialism.

Waggoner writes:

Muslim agency essentially differs in that its form is tied to the habituation of prescribed norms of the culture rather than to the expectation to question and individuate from society... Furthermore, while Mahmood’s argument that Muslim desire differs from Western desire is based on the point that these two cultures represent different sets of historical conditions, thus they shape subjects differently, the conclusion that desires differ along cultural lines tends to introduce an ahistorical claim: that there are fixed desires, goals, and subject forms unique to specific cultures. The empiricism of Mahmood’s method lends itself to the same kind of cultural essentialism she has sought to avoid.¹⁶

Waggoner notes that historicizing agency, pushed to its limits, denotes an ahistorical move that closes down each context onto itself by way of disregarding that culture is not fixed, but always on the move, that it is not unitary, but fragmented, that it is not self-contained, but dialectical. If this is where Mahmood’s project takes us, then we are left with a definition of culture that is thoroughly problematic. The resources to resist the universalization of a Western desire to freedom in all its unrecognized historical specificity and applicability to certain other contexts are not to be sought by siding with a cultural relativist position which essentializes culture by way of positing two sets of desires that are irreconcilable.

What, then, is the alternative? Are we doomed to either blind universalism or misguided cultural relativism? Merry’s discussion on human rights and violence against women offers another alternative that Mahmood’s project could be amenable to: that we must

¹⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 5.

¹⁶ Waggoner, “Irony, Embodiment, and the ‘Critical Attitude’: Engaging Saba Mahmood’s Critique of Secular Morality,” 249.

undertake the labor of cultural translation by working through the tensions. By taking up “culture as contested,” she suggests that we can in fact create this alternative and delegitimize claims of both universalism and relativism.¹⁷ “Culture in this sense,” she writes, “does not serve as a barrier to human rights mobilization but as a context that defined relationships and meanings and constructs the possibilities of action.”¹⁸ By pursuing this alternative, we are moving away from the kinds of detrimental universalism that Mahmood protests, yet not towards an uncritical position that advocates blind preservation of a culture. Thereby, Mahmood’s attempts to demonstrate the historical specificity (rather than natural validity) of the “agency as autonomy” formulation must not take us to a point where we yield to the inherent relativism of the notion of agency. There are resources, indeed, within Mahmood’s project to reject cultural relativism and undertake the labor of cultural translation. That her account focuses on the participants of the mosque movement who reject what they take to be Western values and instead endorse what they take to be cultural authenticity does not mean that Mahmood uncritically agrees with them. We are to be cautious not to inadvertently dismiss the alternative of cultural translation that Mahmood’s project may elicit. We must take her seriously when she states that she means to gesture at “a mode of encountering the Other which does not assume that in the process of culturally translating other lifeworlds one’s own certainty about how the world should proceed can remain stable.”¹⁹ This gesture does not refer to positing two essential, irreconcilable cultures, but rather points to a possibility of a transformative project of translation that the encounter may serve as the occasion to. We shall explore this possibility of cultural translation further in the last part of this essay, within the context of an alternative reading of Mahmood.

Feminist Reception of Mahmood’s Project: Problem of Relevance

¹⁷ Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 199.

Another worry that feminists shared about this project regards its *relevance* to feminism. Mahmood draws attention to the importance of “analysis as a mode of conversation, rather than mastery, [which] can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making other lifeworlds extinct or provisional.”²⁰ How can this be a feminist project, Selim wonders, as “if we were to shift the terms of this conversation from the United States to Egypt, the ‘lifeworld’ in actual danger of becoming ‘extinct or provisional’ is that of feminism itself – dissident, secular, and anti-colonial.”²¹ We are to recognize, Selim contends, although the pious Egyptian woman is positioned as the Other of the Western feminist and is at risk of being made “extinct or provisional,” the Egyptian feminist, “dissident, secular, and anti-colonial,” is at the very same risk within the context of Egypt. In a similar vein, Bangstad suggests that Mahmood is endorsing “a politics which subordinates the exercise of female autonomy and agency to the interests of a ‘preservation of life forms,’”²² and that her project cannot, in effect, have any relevance, let alone value, to feminism, for “there simply is no way of reconciling feminism with a perspective which appears to prioritize the ‘preservation of life forms’ over women’s rights.”²³ Van der Veer shares similar concerns as he writes: “While Mahmood’s interpretation may help Western feminists to understand better the agency of Muslim women involved in the piety movement, it is not entirely clear to what extent this improved understanding will further or undermine feminism as an emancipatory movement.”²⁴

To what extent, then, is Mahmood’s project ‘feminist’? What is the value of her reformulation of agency for feminism? Do we cease our struggles over women’s rights as Bangstad suggests if we embrace a conception of agency that is not equated with a strive for

²⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 199.

²¹ Selim, “Book Review,” (online source).

²² Bangstad, “Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue,” 42.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Van der Veer, “Embodiment, Materiality, and Power,” 811.

autonomy or liberty, but instead denotes “a capacity for action that historically specific notions of subordination enable and create?”²⁵ What can this redefinition do for us?

First, it must be pointed out that this definition by no means forecloses or undermines acts or possibilities of resistance, but instead shifts the focus from ‘resistance’ to ‘capacities for action’ or ‘inhabitation of norms’. That is to say, Mahmood is not concerned with rendering secular/liberal projects of feminism obsolete by pointing to certain expressions of agency that are untranslatable in terms of a secular/liberal framework. Her aim rather seems to be to reformulate agency in such a way that it would become a more capacious concept that can attest to a set of experiences and practices that it previously omitted. In this sense, it is important to note that Mahmood is undertaking an *inclusive* project. But is it feminist, necessarily?

Mahmood’s distinction between two modalities of feminism – analytical and political – may help us address this. She suggests that our analytical projects of “offering a *diagnosis* of women’s status across cultures” are not to be determined by our politically *prescriptive* projects that seek emancipation through “changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginalized, subordinated, or oppressed.”²⁶ That is not to say that feminist diagnosis and prescription “should remain deaf to each other, only that they should not be collapsed into each other.”²⁷ Mahmood writes: “By allowing theoretical inquiry some immunity from the requirements of strategic political action, we leave open the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate political events.”²⁸ In other words, by refusing to conflate diagnosis and prescription, Mahmood accounts for a richer analysis that is not determined by one’s political commitments. In this, she insinuates that insofar as one is concerned with enriching of her

²⁵ Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent,” 203.

²⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 196.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

diagnosis by freeing it from political determination, her account does not bear direct political implications (including Mahmood's own). One may suggest that from the outset Mahmood accepts that her project cannot offer anything much of relevance to feminist *politics*, regardless of her own political commitments as a feminist. Yet it is also possible to read her suggestion that we should not conflate analytical and political modalities of feminism as *not* foreclosing the possibility of influence, but only determination: our diagnosis cannot *determine* our politics, but may very well *inform* it, and *vice versa*. We may, then, look at what her analysis contributes to diagnostic feminism, and from then on explore the ways in which the diagnosis that Mahmood offers inform our politics.

A Third Alternative: Locating *Politics of Piety* within Feminist Discourse

Mahmood's diagnostic claim is that if we attend only to the ways in which norms are contested or subverted, our analyses are going to prove sterile in accounting for the variety of the ways in which norms are inhabited. We now are going to explore what this insight can contribute to a feminist analysis. Since Mahmood's project is amenable to a poststructuralist feminist framework, Butler's account would offer the needed contrast.

Şeyla Benhabib has famously argued that by taking the subject as an effect of discourse, Butler's project cannot account for feminist aspirations, as subjectivity as such forecloses the possibility of "agency, autonomy, and selfhood" that are so central to feminist projects of emancipation.²⁹ To this, Butler responded that subject (and in turn, agency) is "the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process."³⁰ Mahmood would side with Butler in this debate, as she sees Butler as an ally to the case she makes "for uncoupling the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will."³¹ Yet, she also adds that her position indicates a significant point of divergence from that of Butler: "[T]he normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is

²⁹ Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," 21.

³⁰ Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," 47.

³¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion,” whereas her account explores the “dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.”³² That is to say, to conceptualize agency “in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms” misses out on the complexities of experience that are not reducible to subversion or resignification. Thus, a Butlerian framework is not going to be fruitful for the kind of analysis Mahmood is willing to undertake. Further, Mahmood would also dismiss Benhabib’s suggestion to posit autonomy as a precondition for agency, for Mahmood is interested in those modalities of agency which are inexpressible within, or simply irrelevant to, a vocabulary of autonomy. Thus, Mahmood offers an alternative to the two positions of this debate, whose unique contribution will now be explored through another feminist critique of Butler to which Mahmood’s account offers a response.

From a rather different perspective than that of Benhabib’s, Magnus points to the inadequacy of the terms Butler offers for subjectivity.³³ Butler’s claim that “[t]he subject is constructed through *acts of differentiation* that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside”³⁴ offers a negative account of subjectivity that highlights ‘differentiation’, with the implication that the context through which the subject is constituted is necessarily oppressive.³⁵ Magnus suggests that this offers a negative conception of agency that entails “a limited conception of creativity.”³⁶ In a similar vein to Mahmood’s concern, Magnus writes: “Butler’s reduction of agency to the performance of subversive speech acts implies that creativity may only be exercised in the form of resistance. Such a negative and restricted

³² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

³³ See Magnus, “The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency.”

³⁴ Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” 46. Emphasis added.

³⁵ Magnus, “The Unaccountable Subject,” 84.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 88.

notion of agency neglects the possibility of other, more positive forms of creativity.”³⁷ We may read Mahmood’s account as a response to this need of articulating such positive forms of creativity, thereby offering a more capacious conception of agency that is not primarily negative. These creative modes of agency are especially emphasized in Mahmood’s discussion of an embodied practice of ethics that blurs the distinction between interiority and exteriority by way of a self-creating affective experience, whose connotations we will now explore.

In order to demonstrate how Mahmood’s analysis of agency offers resources for a feminism of “the third alternative,” we shall turn briefly to Sonia Kruks, who also proposes a third alternative to what she calls ‘discursive’ and ‘Enlightenment’ accounts of agency. Kruks’s alternative is to attend to the “interconstituency of the biological, affective, cultural, and discursive domains”³⁸ that come to be lived as embodied experience, thereby accounting for “the experiential complexity”³⁹ that reductive frameworks of rationality or discourse fail to grasp. She writes: “[F]eminist theory must continue to hold onto the concept of experience and must attend *to the ways in which experience can exceed discursivity*.”⁴⁰ I argue that Mahmood’s account does precisely that: through a display of the embodied ethical practices that the participants of the mosque movement employ, Mahmood not only makes room for but *centralizes* the positive affective experience for an analysis of agency.

Mahmood would agree with Kruks that poststructuralist feminism is inadequate, especially for the project at hand (that is, giving an account for “the imaginary of the mosque movement”), because of “the relationship it assumes between the body and discourse, one modeled on a linguistic theory of signification.”⁴¹ In explicating the embodied ethical practices of the women of the mosque movement, Mahmood suggests that we are to attend to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 150.

³⁹ Ibid, 149.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 133. Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 159.

“the different ways in which people live [moral] codes” and “not simply the values enshrined in [them],” so that we may see “what relationships [people] establish between the various constitutive elements of the self (body, reason, emotion, volition, and so on) and a particular norm.”⁴² Thereby, with this analytical shift the focus becomes “the *work* bodily practices perform in crafting a subject – rather than the *meanings* they signify.”⁴³ In these embodied modes of self-creation, desire becomes a product of action, rather than its antecedent,⁴⁴ and similarly, emotions are also “acquired and cultivated.”⁴⁵ Mahmood gives “fear of God” as an example, which is not “natural, but something that must be *learned*.”⁴⁶ Ritual worship, Mahmood notes, is “both *enacted through*, and *productive of*, intentionality, volitional behavior, and sentiments.”⁴⁷ Repeated action, in this sense, gives way to self-realization, a becoming of the pious self, through self-regulation that not only pertains to one’s behavior, but also extends to her emotions.

Mahmood notes that in this context the distinction between exteriority (of external impediment) and interiority (of affective experience) is obfuscated. As “convention as exterior” and “desire as interior” loses its significance, the dyadic resistance/domination model proves sterile in accounting for these agential practices. “[T]he outward behavior of the body constitutes both potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized.”⁴⁸ Thus, one’s authentic desires (for freedom, or otherwise) and “obligatory social conventions” do not represent a meaningful distinction “precisely because socially prescribed forms of behavior constitute the conditions for the emergence of the self as such and are integral to its realization.”⁴⁹

⁴² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 120.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 126.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 144.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 144.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 159.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 149.

One may argue that the account Mahmood offers for the obfuscation of the interior and exterior by way of corporeal inhabitation of norms is formulated through poststructuralist terms whereby the discursive traditions constitute the subjects via seizure and transformation of interior manifestations of power (affects, sensations, desire, etc.). However, this would be a misreading since Mahmood is resistant to a prioritization of resignification in accounting for this pious experience. How these affects are experienced, for Mahmood, is not primarily understood as discursive effects. One would err if she disregards that “although subjects are constituted through discursive traditions, they experience, through their participation in social relations around these texts, various sensations, desires, and so on that are not themselves discursive,”⁵⁰ as Clare puts it in her reading of Mahmood. That is to say, although affectivity and corporeality partake in ‘the chain of signification’, they are not *primarily* discursive, but are rather sites of extra-discursivity that underscore an irreducible experiential complexity. By virtue of this complexity, they point to a beyond, an excess that is not readily captured by signifiatory analyses. Mahmood’s account of corporeality, then, denotes an analytical shift: as Clare puts it, “[W]e move from the signification of the body to *the becoming of the body* through practice.”⁵¹

This is precisely the point where Mahmood’s project intersects with Kruks’s: the body attests to the ambiguity of lived experience as interconstituted. Subjectivity is not simply a discursive production, but “a process of embodied becoming.”⁵² This is even more salient in one particular passage in *Politics of Piety* that concludes Mahmood’s analysis by highlighting its unique contribution to the feminist debate on agency:

Insomuch as this kind of analysis suggests that different modalities of agency require different kinds of bodily capacities, it forces us to ask whether acts of resistance (to systems of gender hierarchy) *also devolve upon the ability of the body to behave in particular ways*. From this perspective, transgressing gender norms may not be a matter of transforming ‘consciousness’ or effecting change

⁵⁰ Clare, “Agency, Signification, and Temporality,” 54. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Ibid, 61.

⁵² Ibid, 61.

in the signifiatory system of gender, but might well require *the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments* – those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation.⁵³

This passage raises at least two interrelated points that are consequential and that I have been tracing throughout this paper: First, Mahmood’s commitment to an embodied account of agency and affectivity offers a third feminist alternative that is fruitful. Second, far from falling into cultural relativism, this project seeks to change the ways in which we analyze agency across cultures, thereby offering resources for undertaking the labor of cultural translation. Let us now explicate how these exactly play out in Mahmood’s project.

By attending to the interplay of the discursive and the extra-discursive within affectivity, Mahmood’s project parallels Kruks’s by way of showing “the inadequacy of discourse reductionism,” as well as “the rationalist dismissal of embodied experience.”⁵⁴ This enables us to position Mahmood within the Benhabib-Butler debate as *a third alternative*, given that they put emphasis, respectively, on “rational accountability,”⁵⁵ and “matrices of power and discourse”⁵⁶ in the formation of subjectivity. Rather than conducting a feminist analysis of agency by taking either “transforming ‘consciousness’” or “effecting change in the signifiatory system of gender” central to the conception of agency, Mahmood urges us to pay close attention to “those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation.”⁵⁷ In this, Mahmood sides with Kruks that these registers, “sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments”⁵⁸ offer a new resource of analysis by attending to the corporeality, a site of interconstituency, through which we may recognize, as Kruks suggests and Mahmood attests to, “that emotions often exceed...discourse,”⁵⁹ and that “[s]entient, affective, and emotional experiences come to be a vital constituent of cognition,

⁵³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 188. Emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 144.

⁵⁵ Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 20.

⁵⁶ Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” 42.

⁵⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 188.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 146.

judgment, and speech”⁶⁰ (although cognition, judgment, and speech in turn shapes affectivity itself, according to Mahmood). Moreover, the two modalities of feminism (diagnosis and prescription) may both utilize and further explore the implications of this unit of analysis: whereas feminist diagnosis may concern itself with analyzing “the formation of sensibilities, sensations, and desires”⁶¹ (as opposed to discourse analysis *per se*), feminist politics may understand itself as aiming at the transformation of these, or, in Mahmood’s words, “the *remaking* of sensibilities and commitments”⁶² and “*retraining* of sensibilities, affect, desire, and sentiments.”⁶³ Thus, far from giving an account that is irrelevant to feminism, Mahmood offers an experiential alternative through her account of embodied ethical practices that are entangled with affective mode of self-transformation.⁶⁴

Moreover, Mahmood’s project does not fall into cultural relativism or employ essentializing modes of agency (by way of postulating an essentially Western and an essentially Muslim agency, as Waggoner suggests), precisely because she does not stop at a mere historicization of agency that in turn becomes untranslatable across cultural contexts, but rather, by seeking to transform the ways in which we think about agency, she *generalizes* her reformulation of agency as “a modality of action,”⁶⁵ and “the grammar of concepts in which its particular affect, meaning, and form resides.”⁶⁶ By taking up *resistance*, if we were to go back to Butler, as a particular modality of agency that “devolve[s] upon the ability of the body to behave in particular ways,”⁶⁷ Mahmood offers a corporeal basis to ground transnational feminist projects. This, again, parallels with Kruks’s suggestion of taking up “the role of

⁶⁰ Ibid, 147.

⁶¹ Clare, “Agency, Signification, and Temporality,” 54.

⁶² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Ibid, 188. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Mahmood also gives an account of the ways in which these embodied ethical practices transform the public discourse. Their political bearing calls into question the dimension of normativity, i.e. to what end are these sensibilities trained, or more importantly, to what end are they *ought to be* trained? Although questions such as these are beyond the scope of this paper, they are very much bound up with the conclusions that Mahmood draws, and are yet to be addressed for those conclusions to hold up.

⁶⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 157.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 188.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 188.

embodied experience as an affective basis for solidarity among women.”⁶⁸ Mahmood’s project, then, may be amenable to feminist projects of cultural translation by virtue of its focus on embodied agential practices that mark the extra-discursive dimension of experience.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that *Politics of Piety* offers more than what its critics care to admit: the corporeal articulation of agency by attending particularly to positive (such as love and hope) and negative (such as fear) affective experiences⁶⁹ offers a third feminist alternative. Further, this alternative provides a basis for feminist solidarity that, for Mahmood, “could only ensue within the uncertain, at times opaque, conditions of intimate and uncomfortable encounters in all their eventuality.”⁷⁰ This uncertainty, or opacity, by no means precludes the possibility of solidarity; on the contrary, it constitutes the very condition that projects of cultural translation may gradually demystify. Thus, the corporeal basis for solidarity Mahmood offers, contrary to the convictions of her critics, has positive diagnostic and political implications that pertain to the projects of cultural translation that transnational feminist analyses undertake.

-Fulden Ibrahimhakkioğlu

⁶⁸ Kruks, *Retrieving Experience*, 152.

⁶⁹ Mahmood gives an account of these by calling them “the classical triad” invoked by the participants of the mosque movement (140). She notes that these affects are not merely motivational devices, but are “integral aspects of pious action itself” (140).

⁷⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 199.

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