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“Scrivere di Islam”: A Collaborative Project

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Simone Brioni is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Stony Brook University, USA. His research focuses on migration studies and postcolonial theory with a particular emphasis on contemporary Italian culture.

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel is a writer based in Birmingham, Padua and Kuala Lumpur. Her publications include the novels *Far from Mogadishu* (2013), *Clouds Over the Equator*, *The Forgotten Italians* (2017) and the collections of poems *Wings* (2018) and *I Suckled Sweetness* (2019).

Abstract: Simone Brioni and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel discuss their collaboration, with a particular emphasis on the co-written scholarly text *Scrivere di Islam: Raccontare la diaspora* (Venezia: Cà Foscari Edizioni, 2020).

Key words: collaboration, diversity, Italian Islam, diaspora, reception

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“Scrivere di Islam”: A Collaborative Project

SIMONE BRIONI AND SHIRIN RAMZANALI FAZEL

We believe in collaboration. We have worked together and with others for the production of both artistic and scholarly works. We believe in the power of dialogue to shape anti-racist artistic and scholarly research, and to call out injustice and ignorance. We believe that collaboration is difficult, but needed. Collaboration hopefully can facilitate the promotion of equality, responsibility, empathy and mutual respect. In a world in which migrant voices still struggle to find space and be heard, perhaps unifying our voices in dialogue, as racialized minorities and allies, can be a way of making them louder and challenging the structures which exclude and deprive them of access to participation.

Who are our allies? One of the first bits of feedback we received about “Scrivere di Islam” was an email written by a common acquaintance, a respected and educated person whose work deals with immigration and refugee rights in Italy. He wrote Shirin, observing that her section of the book seemed to be “an apology of Islamism.” Shirin replied that she was actually opposed to Islamism, but this person dismissed Shirin’s defense of her intention, saying “we agree to disagree.” In a later thread, Simone intervened and simply reaffirmed Shirin’s point. This time the reader “somehow”—we suspect white and male privilege played a role in it—understood Shirin’s point and acknowledged that he had misunderstood her point. Despite his role as a cultural mediator, this person did not know the difference between Islamism and Islam, and it took the intervention of a white academic for him to change his opinion. This exchange confirmed the need for a volume like *Scrivere di Islam: Raccontare la Diaspora* to contribute to discussions about Islamophobia. We were disheartened to realize how much Islamophobic language has been normalized in Italian, how widely it has permeated Italian society, and how Simone’s ventriloquist role seemed necessary for Shirin to get her point heard.

Scrivere di Islam is the result of a friendship that started in 2010, when we both moved to Britain from Northern Italy. Since then, we have built a relationship based on trust, respect, and honest and frank communication. We could also have been drawn to collaborate to feel less lonely while facing a cultural market and an academic environment in which migration literature is not adequately valued or recognized for its important role in helping us understand the mobile and diasporic world in which we live.

Our collaboration was built on the recognition of our own limits and the valorization of the unique knowledge of the other. Simone saw one limit in his upbringing and education, which made him take for granted the invisible norm of whiteness and Catholicism that dominates Italian culture. Collaborating with Shirin and studying her work in her proximity helped him to think about how his access to the means of cultural dissemination could not only be used to discuss literature about immigration, but also to facilitate the important reflections and lived experiences that migrant writers have gifted Italian literature with. He believes collaboration helped him understand the intrinsic dynamics of power that are involved in the process of editing, framing, introducing, and translating, which so frequently mediates—and often disempowers and instrumentalizes—migrants’ voices in popular media.

Shirin’s contribution to the collaboration was her compelling ability to narrate her unique lived experience as a Somali woman in a newly independent country experiencing a unique decolonization process, an Italian refugee from Somalia, an African woman in Italy and a Muslim woman wearing the hijab in Italy and the UK. Shirin was born in Mogadishu in the ‘50s, during the Italian Trusteeship Administration (AFIS), and she spent her teenage years in Somalia until the military regime took over. In those years, Italy had a strong political and cultural influence in Somalia; thus, Italian culture pervades her memories, education, and language. She came to Italy in 1971 and has seen huge changes since then in what she perceives to be the society she belongs to. She has travelled and lived as an

expat in four continents, including Africa (Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Tunisia), Asia (Malaysia), Europe (Italy and United Kingdom), and the US. Thanks to her heterogeneous cultural background and her ability to speak multiple languages, Shirin has known refugees, migrants, and religious minorities whose stories would perhaps not been known if not voiced in her literary works.

In this context, Shirin also recognizes her privilege as an Italian citizen since 1970 who has never known the humiliation of standing for hours in a queue at the Police Headquarters when a residency permit expires, the anxiety caused by endless bureaucracy, the frustration of not having a house because of the landlord's rejection due to her skin color, and the despair of being deported from a country because she has lost legal status.

However, this privilege of being an Italian citizen is overridden at times by prejudice and racism because she is a Muslim Italian. Wearing the hijab is for her a way to express her religious belonging, and it is a sign for people with interesting stories to tell that they have hopefully found someone who will listen to them. It is therefore sad for her to see that this piece of cloth often carries a stigma and is also seen as an imposition on women. It is unpleasant to be judged for one's clothes rather than for one's intellectual capacities, especially at a time in which women wearing a headscarf, like Halimah Yacob, serve their countries as presidents. What Shirin sees as a symbol of inclusion is perceived by some as a sign of unbelonging and backwardness.

Collaborative practices can be a way of questioning one's beliefs and assumptions, or at least that characterized our experience. Interrogating the socio-historical, geographical, linguistic, religious, and cultural conditions in which knowledge is produced through a dialogue can be a way to rethink—and, most importantly, challenge—how we create notions of Selfness and Alterity and include or exclude people based on these categories.

Works Cited

Brioni, Simone, and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel. *Scrivere di Islam. Raccontare la diaspora*. Venezia: Edizioni Cà Foscari, 2020. <http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-411-0>.