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Stones and the Destabilisation of Safe Ethical Space

This article investigates the role of ethical boundaries for the academic and the artist/researcher in stabilising or destabilising colonialised positions of power. It stems from an increasingly urgent need to understand how the exclusion of pluralistic knowledge production continues in professional contexts and how this supports supremacist structural power imbalances. Our point of departure is postcolonial theorist Edward Said's (1935-2003) concept of "othering" the non-western human being via false colonial narratives, brutal invasions, and colonial settler practices (Said 1978/2000). One of the main focuses of post-colonial theorists is to reveal and criticise categorisation practices that refer and differentiate between "us" and "others", and denote subjects associated with the "West" and "non-West", respectively (Bayati 2014, 44). In this article, we investigate the process of Othering and categorisation that we encountered during various gatherings of artists and educators to improve inclusion and diversity in publically funded art education institutions. We ask: How is it possible to negotiate ethical standpoints when built on a colonial construction of Otherness?

We have developed an understanding of an ethical practice that we term the "Safe Ethical Space," where norms and standards of ethics are used to dismiss pluralistic knowledge production. We draw on our experience as artists and researchers in processes and discourses of decoloniality, education, and art production. We consider how dominant ethical boundaries, albeit with noble intentions, support institutionalised colonising structures, in this instance art education.

There are various discourses of decoloniality and decolonisation that develop concepts associated with geo-territorial boundaries and knowledge production. However, this article sites decolonisation primarily in the body as a living territory, a specific site of intersectional, gendered, and colonised suppression. Theorist in comparative literature Neetu Khanna explores this aspect of decolonisation in *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (2000). She analyses involuntary bodily reflexes and reactions apparent in decolonising processes from literary sources including the works of postcolonial psychiatrist and political philosopher Franz Fanon (1925-1961). She maintains that these bodily reflexes and reactions are transmitted between two bodies.

Furthermore, she draws attention to the discursive nature of postcolonial analysis that neglects consideration of affect and the body. She asks us to consider the consequences of undoing the visceral lessons of colonialism in the thoughts and emotions embodied in postcolonial subjects. We partially explore this question in the discussion of *MIL-The mosque as an inclusive force in the local community* [3]. However, where Khanna suggests that racialised historical memories are allowed to play out because they go unrecognised, this article draws attention to what happens in an aesthetic knowledge-making process when the focus of attention is the visceral or embodied reflexes of a conflict.

In the context of art education, as semiotician Walter Mignolo and sociologist Ronaldo Vázquez argue, contemporary research and art production are part of "the colonial matrix of power" (Quijano 2007) that controls global economies, politics and knowledge production, but also the senses and perception through aesthetics, thus colonising all aspects of human life (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013). They claim that modern aesthetics with its normative canon help disregard and reject other forms of artist practice. This decolonising perspective, read with feminist and philosopher of physics Karen Barad's theory of "agential realism," which decentres human agency (Barad 2007), allows us to understand how individual visceral human responses (Khanna 2020) come to matter in reproducing colonising structures. Agency in agential realism is not bound to any being or object: "agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has" (Barad 2007, 178). Reading with this understanding, ethical response-ability, the ability to respond ethically to the Other, in a matter or entanglement is central to decolonising research activities for a more equitable future (Barad 2007, 394-396; Mignolo and Vázquez 2013). We will later discuss how visual art functions as a material in ethical intra-actions in our desire to be response-able in decolonising processes during knowledge production of text and image.

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[1] Helen Eriksen. *Throwing stones and hatching,* 2020. © Helen Eriksen.

Summary

MIL: The Mosque as an Inclusive Power in the Local Community
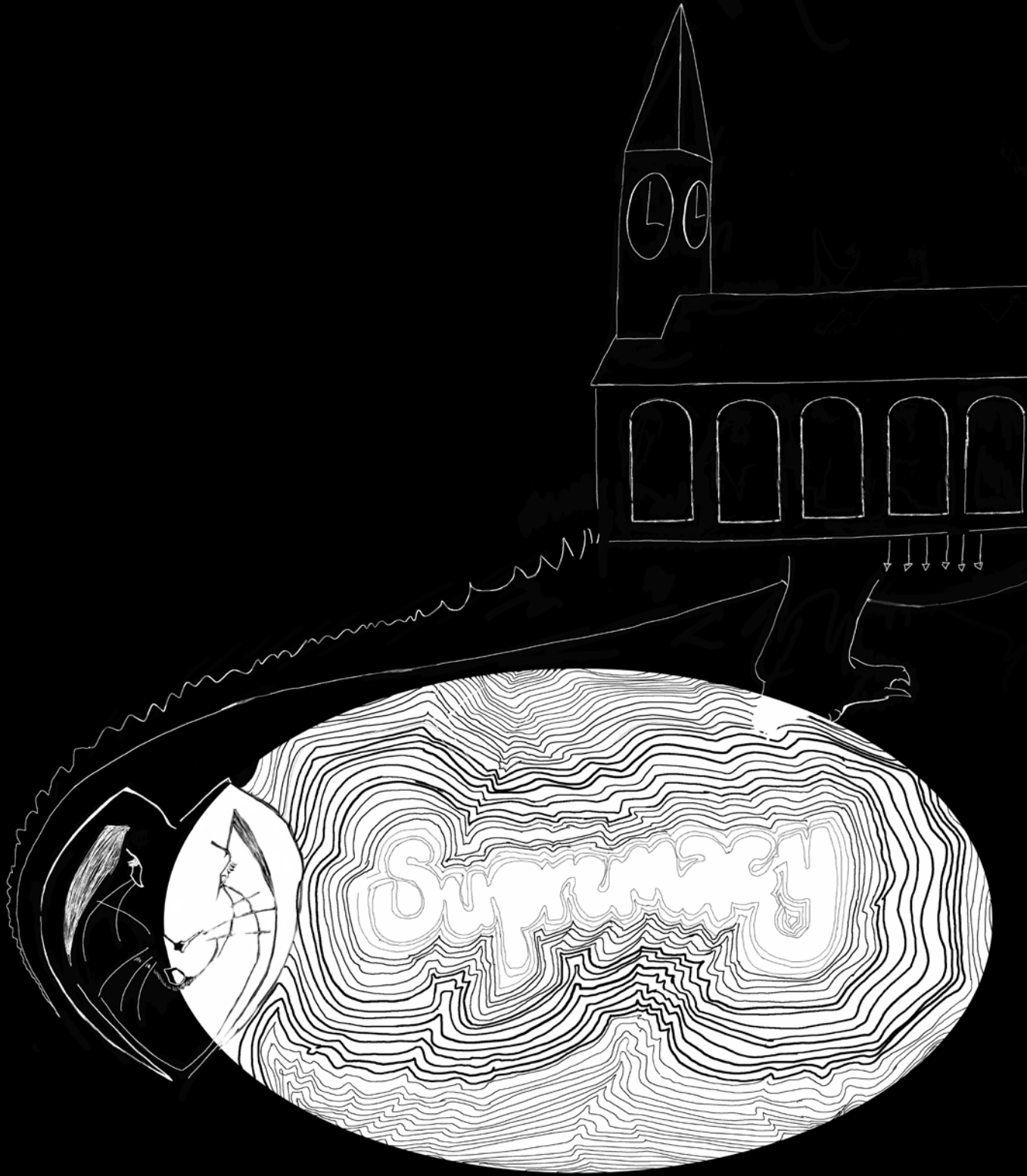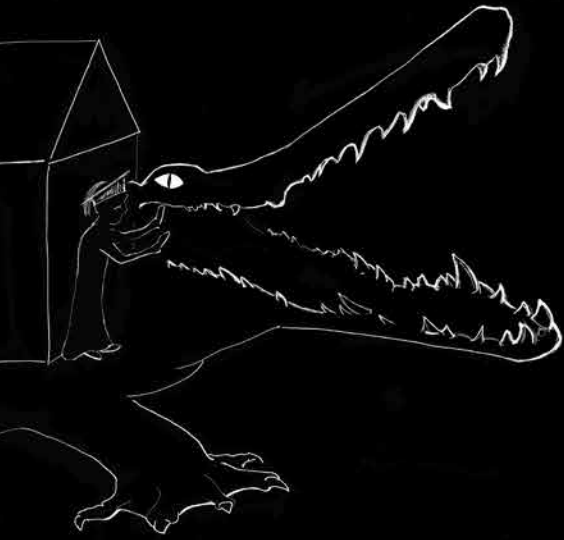
This study is based on an event that transpired between the authors/participants at a preconference meeting and comprises different intra-actions with emerging visual elements. We are inspired by duoethnography as an approach to study how two or more individuals give similar and different meanings to a common experiential phenomenon (Sawyer & Norris 2012). It avoids the hegemonic style of the meta-narrative found in autoethnography. It can serve as a means to discuss how "lessons of difference" (McClellan & Sader 2012, 137) enable us to unpack, expose, and engage in the intertwining of racialised voices and experiences.

Our individual narratives gain relevance through the intra-actions within the narrative structure, as well as with art making, and other humans. Helen and Gry produced several visual works articulating their own embodied understanding and experience of decolonisation processes. Gry used collage, text, and animation with sound as an entry point into the complexity of decolonisation. Helen draws colonising phenomena in the form of a crocodile and a rabbit **[1] [4]**, developed during the inquiry. They are the sum of many conversations between Helen, Zahra, and Gry. All elements are visually balanced but conflict with each other as much as our positionalities tried to find equilibrium as we conflicted with each other in conversation. Crocodiles, in particular, are used to draw attention to dangerous false empathy when the colonised structures of any institution are questioned as in Ryen (2019): "This makes higher educational institutions resemble crocodiles. Despite their tears, their empathy is not with their victims" (619). The rabbit symbolises fear, flight, and silence as an embodied response to racial conflict that supports dominant White institutional structures in both the workplace and domestic settings (DiAngelo 2011, 55; Matias 2016). Artistic research practice, in the materiality of the image, brings forward and develops a conversation about ethical norms and behaviour across disparate fields that we could not otherwise have engaged in. *Throwing stones and hatching* **[1]** and *MIL-The mosque as an inclusive force in the local community* **[3]** mattered because of the power they had to provoke conversations about meaning-making and knowledge production through the agency of imagery, and our visceral and analytical intra-actions.

Our inquiry moves between two fields of research practice: art and education. Superficially, these fields appear to understand research ethics differently. At first glance, they seem to stem from incommensurable rationalities (Kuhn 2012). In conventional scientific practice, ethics are developed and followed through standardised guidelines and judgements of ethical committees[2], whereas in artistic research discourses, artistic autonomy and professional integrity have

hidden codes or laws of equal strength and dominance to conventional scientific ethical understanding. As art historian Grant Kester (2011, 1-17) indicates, the apparent epistemic pluralism in the field of art follows a prevailing Modernist doxa that regulates artistic knowledge production and the application of ethical codes in art production and art-based research. This doxa is revealed in the debate on artistic research and academic research. The distinction is made between free art on its own terms and unfree art that follows academic regulations and demands (Ericsson 2020). The concept of free art presupposes art as detached from ideology, values, politics, and a lack of epistemological training in art education. Where discourses of the artist's autonomy and individual integrity prevail, they lean on formalities, legitimising and arguing for a position drawn from art history (Helguera 2011). It encourages a micro-detachment from knowledge production in a macro perspective to reproduce an understanding of art production as autonomous and performed by an individual White male genius isolated in his studio. Thus the artist is perceived without a binding context and beyond a collective process, operating as an isolated individual in his production process where the object is presented and received as passive, without agency. Inspired by Barad (2007), this inquiry perceives the production and existence of images and the becoming of this text as intra-active processes that raise ethical questions related to our positionality within the colonial matrix of power.

Positioning within the Matrix

Our different starting points are embodied in us at different positions in the colonial matrix of power which is barely revealed in our bios. Zahra is perceived as part of the dominant Iranian majority. In a Scandinavian context, she is racialised as non-White and Other; she fled to Sweden with a small child during the revolution. Helen is unmarked[3] racialised White, British with a Norwegian parent, she was brought up in the UK and moved to Norway in 1990. Gry is also unmarked racialised White, born, raised and living in Norway. All three authors have children often seen as Other due to their physical appearance: hair, eyes, skin colour. These different starting points enable us to challenge and thus destabilise the colonial matrix of power as it emerges in the setting of knowledge production. Individual identities are given different spaces and prominences depending on the context and the current power schemes by which our identities are surrounded and structured (Bayati 2014; Bhabha & Rutherford 1999; Gutmann 1999). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (1932-2014) description of cultural identities as "unstable points of identification or sutures created by the discourses of history and culture. In other words, a position rather than essence" (Hall 1999,
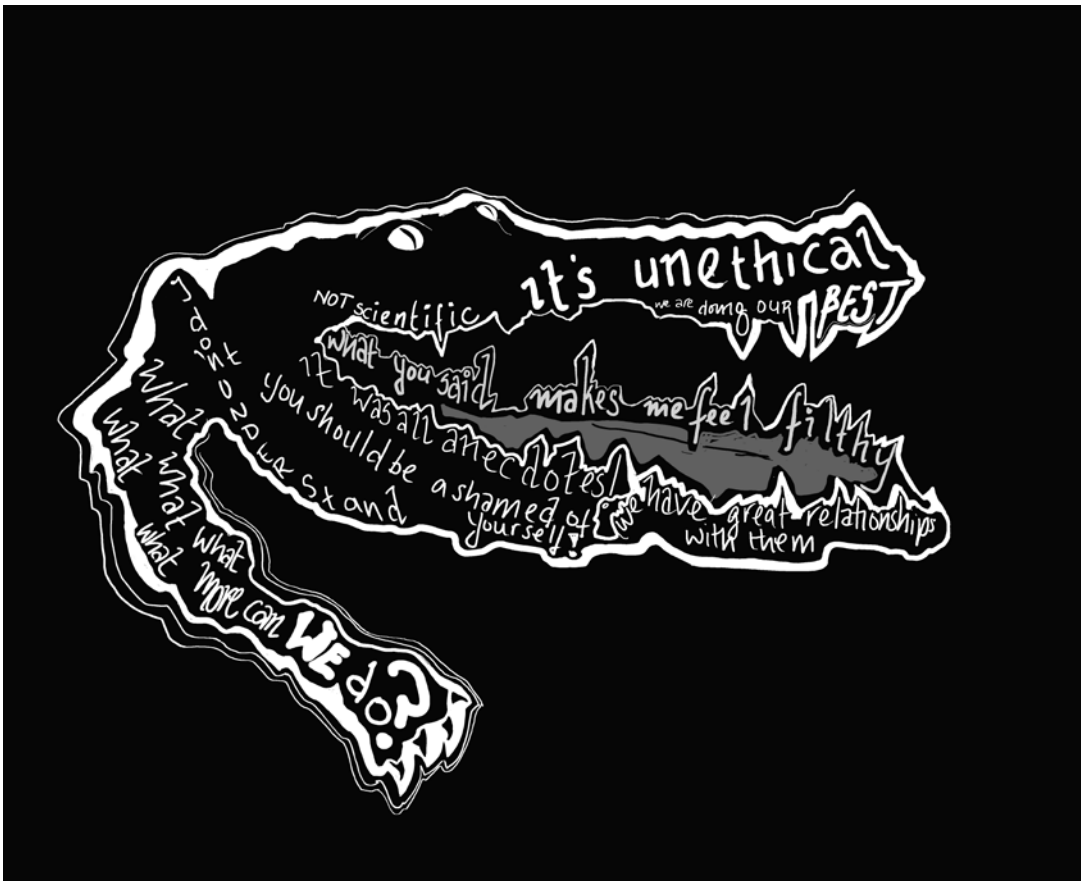
234) is consistent with our conception of identities. This instability of position is an important factor in this inquiry, since it allows for the transformation of the researcher-subject. As the study's main participants with starting points in our own singular identities, we encountered blurred and porous boundaries. This research contributed to the transformation of our identities with even more diffuse boundaries.

Point of Collective Departure

Our collaboration started as a post-qualitative mode of response to the enactment of aggressive reactions to critical perspectives at a network conference of teachers, administrators, and researchers. The conference theme was the inclusion of minority children and young adults in Scandinavian municipal non-compulsory art education. Later, we attended several other conferences with similar themes hosted by educational and artistic institutions and experienced episodes that questioned our position as anti-racist individuals [2]. Our discussion emerged when the three of us met for a preconference meeting. This collaboration was unplanned, but the situation arose where conventional scientific procedures were incommensurable with the reality we encountered. According to St. Pierre (2018, 605), post-qualitative inquiry refuses Enlightenment's idea of scientific methodology because it reduces reality rather than expanding it. Our inquiry attends "to the sur-prises that point to difference and refus(es) the impoverished answers we've given to the questions the world has posed" (St. Pierre 2018, 605). Thus, our inquiry begins in embodied experience, and uses drawing and collage as artistic research strategies to engage with the "provocation," "the anomaly," and the "too strange" which were our starting points for new questions and discussions.

Struggling in Safe Ethical Space

This text responds to the term "Safe Space for Unsafe Ideas" which was used by facilitators at a conference. In its conventional mode, a safe space is aimed at allowing a critical discussion by centring minority voices in settings otherwise dominated by majority perspectives. Zahra, one of the Critical Friends,[4] was invited to talk about children and young people's encounters with art education from minority perspectives. During this session, entitled *Safe Space for Unsafe Ideas*, the Critical Friends were verbally abused and chastised for voicing critical perspectives on the lack of diversity and inclusion of identifiably non-western youngsters within Scandinavian art and education: fields and perspectives that they were explicitly invited to discuss. When we challenged the conference

initiators about the racial conflict this meeting performed, the dominant White and homogenous group leaned on well-known arguments of exceptionalism to defend their position. The good intentions of the White Scandinavian network members *doing their best* to create inclusive educational organisations was given precedence over the actual reception of those same good intentions by these two Othered speakers [2]. The metaphor of the rabbit [1] suggests Helen's reaction in this racial conflict typical of the fragile White response. The rabbit is frozen, unmoving and silent—observant, neutral, and waiting for a cue to run from conflict.

We asked: Who was the safe space for? Later, feedback from various academic sources questioned our ethical positions as our empirical material was generated during conference attendance. We did not have the delegates' consent to use our experience for research purposes. How could we have asked for the consent expected by prevailing ethical norms and standards? We did not know that this situation would arise and that Others would be attacked in a safe space. Our analysis of this and several other conference experiences showed that the idea of a "Safe Ethical Space" protects a colonised understanding of humans with

different non-European backgrounds, aiding in the reproduction of colonial knowledge systems generally and in art education specifically.

Ethical Response-ability

As we continued our collaborative inquiry, we began to look at our positions as ethical boundary markers. The embodied reaction to *MIL-The mosque as an inclusive force in the local community* **[3]** paralleled certain aspects of our earlier encounter. We recognised the rabbit's silence and neutrality and its desire to run away in our discussion of it **[3]**.

All Those Good Intentions: Gry

I made the animation when I returned from a conference feeling troubled and confused **[3]**. Forty researchers and practitioners from the White Scandinavian majority working within the arts and education were focusing on the integration of minority children and youth in their art educational organisations. I wanted to draw attention to mechanisms and discourses about inclusion in art education **[3]**. This animation with sound defracts questions about who is present in the discussion about inclusion in art educational institutions and how invitations are distributed in the research community. The fictive discussion, between female members of a Muslim congregation, is about the possibility of persuading members of the agnostic majority to join them. How would they benefit, and what name could they use to describe members of that group? The words I put in the mouths of Others made the power gap more evident to me. In the anima-

tion, the vibrating rock in the upper bunk was pointing towards the force of self-satisfied White privilege, a metaphor of the complacent and self-sufficient work of inclusion that refuses to relinquish White privilege.

The Stone: Helen

When I first saw the animation [3], I thought it was witty, idiosyncratic, and mysterious, but really didn't get it. It made me laugh out loud, turning the conversation on its head. It could be a good apparatus[5] to illustrate how we position ourselves with the Other in our conversations. The stone was strange, it was cryptic, but I attributed that to the hidden secret of artmaking, the great ambiguity of the art experience—discomfort and laughter at the same time.

I Wore a Chador: Zahra

Gry, Helen, and I were together preparing our first conference presentation. We discussed several suggestions when Gry mentioned a montage she thought would make it more interesting for the audience. She showed us a couple of pictures; one of them was of women in chadors[6] sitting on the lower level of a bunk bed; above them on the upper bunk was a large stone resembling a cliff which appeared to be about to fall on the women's heads. My immediate reflection was to ask them: "Do you know that I wore a chador as a child and as a teenager, years before the Islamic regime?" [4].

I looked more deeply into the stone and its function in the picture. My first impression was that the stone suggests women's oppression in Iran. Then it felt increasingly problematic because I had thought that Gry and Helen were open and inviting people with a critical eye for stereotypes. In just a few seconds, these thoughts crashed into me and came back and rebounded in the room; I tried not to show what was rushing through my mind.
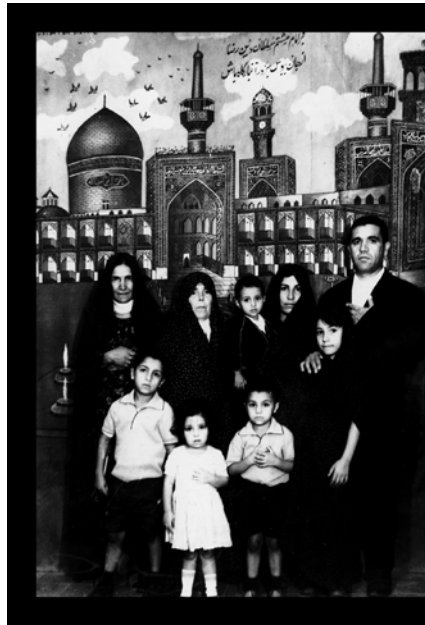
A highlight from this holiday was when we had our picture taken at a photographer's shop. We were all expressing something by our poses. The photographer had instructed us to show reverence for the holy place which now existed as a large poster behind us.

But I took my hand out of the chadoor, thinking it a nice gesture whilst my brother on the far left takes the pose as a cowboy from the films he loved. As soon as the photo was taken we ran to the bazaar and bought sweets and toys with our pocket money, which was for us children the high point of this holiday trip.

[4] Zahra Bayati. *The agency of the image: Where does stereotypical reproduction occur? In the image or with the reception?* 2020. Digital collage. © Zahra Bayati.

Maybe it was Gry's hasty withdrawal of the picture, her stiff face and widening eyes that drew me back into the time and space of the situation. Helen looked down and pulled at her mouth as she usually does when she is gathering herself and formulating. We were focused on writing a chapter for an anthology. Almost immediately I thought, "we are going to have lots of other presentations starting from today, so it's best not to draw too big a conclusion."

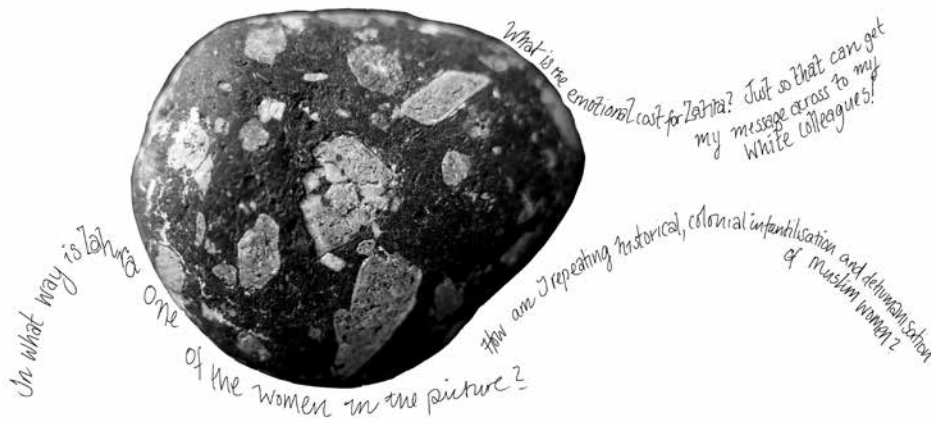### Throwing Stones at the Universe: Helen and Gry

Gry opened some PowerPoint slides we were thinking about presenting; they included *MIL-The mosque as an inclusive force in the local community* [3]. Zahra told us that as a child, she had worn a chador. She transformed into the dark costume worn by the women in the illustration. Like a bolt of lightning, the rock hanging precariously over the women's heads became a powerful symbol of something else. It became highly illustrative of stereotypes of the female body in Iran and other Muslim countries, an image of death, morality, and stoning; it evoked stereotypical ideas of Iranian society. We exchanged glances and removed the slide from the presentation. Instead, we all agreed to present a physical rock as an object of resistance, the material world that says: "No! You cannot walk through me; I am the world, the universe."

The rock gained a meaning beyond our perception as we sat within physical reach of Zahra's perspective. Feminist social activist bell hooks (1990) describes

[5] Helen Eriksen. *Zahra's unspoken questions*, 2020. Digital image. © Helen Eriksen.

the appropriation of pain and the silencing of the Other: "Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. /---/ I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are the centre of my talk" (152). In this instance, we were not even aware of the pain we were appropriating. Here, we were complicit in ignoring intersections of Zahra's perspective and

On the stone handwriting: In what way is Zahra one of the women in the picture? What is the emotional cost for Zahra? Just so that can get my message across to my White colleagues! How am I repeating historical, colonial infantilisation and dehumanisation of Muslim women?

[6] Helen Eriksen. *Gry's unspoken ambivalence*, 2020. © Helen Eriksen.

experience; we relied on a definition whose consequences and meanings were perceived differently by Zahra, and to which we were blind.

When presenting the animation for discussion, other White artists have asked: Why should anyone else's emotions concern me and govern my artistic choices? However, we think it more relevant to ask whose boundaries should be taken into account when drawing up limits of ethics and integrity.

The Stone Penetrates Safe Ethical Space

Time actually stood still for us all. The stream of experiences captured in Zahra's sentence evoked a powerful affect. This decision to exclude the image did not take much linear time. We interpret it as a destabilisation, a rupture in understanding, a place to reconsider our positions and all our cultural/colonised identities. Barad's (2014) understanding of diffraction and entanglement in time, space, and mattering can be applied to this event between us: a moment of recognisable intra-action where coloniality/decoloniality of knowledge production was the matter, the material with which we were struggling. The stone of the past, in the form of the production of modernity/coloniality, the becomings of the future in the impending presentation and the incident collided through the matter of Gry's image. We were thrown into an ethical space that demanded we hold ourselves accountable and take response-ability for the image.

We were all stricken by silence and we have had to painfully negotiate and adjust our positions. If no event can cancel historical understanding (Hacking 2002), then experience, historical events, and understanding far beyond our immediate space or time function come to matter in our present-day existence. "We have to meet the universe halfway, to move toward what may come to be in ways that are accountable for our part in the world's differentiable becoming. All real living is meeting. And each meeting matters" (Barad 2007, 383). We now have to ask; would we have reached the understanding we have today if we were not together in that time and space? Despite working on themes of Whiteness,

inclusion and institutional racism as artists and academics, would Gry and Helen have been able to maintain a much-needed critical distance to their own Whiteness? White normativity and its blindness to itself have repeatedly prevailed in our inquiry. It is here that Khanna's visceral logics (2020) come into play: the space between all three participants in their intersectional positioning allowed emotive charging and affect to emerge where there was no apparent pre-disposition for conflict from the dominant perspective. Here, White incomprehension to the Other's reception of an intended emancipatory animation was ruptured by the materiality of colonisation. Despite Gry withdrawing the animation [3] because she does not want her work to stabilise colonialised power positions, our collective silence stabilises these positions to secure future collaborations. In this event, the artistic ethos of absolute autonomy is ignored. Still, an apparent function of the Safe Ethical Space, silence, is upheld in our response, which also inhibits decolonising knowledge production. Our reactions in this event were founded on a discursive awareness of our positionality within a (de) colonising practice; however, it did not create new knowledge. It merely produced segregated experiences that inhibited dialogue. As educational theorist Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2018) informs us, this silence was "too strange." It was a moment that we could later recognise as significant. Thus, the discussion present in this article is a disruption in recurring colonial memory, allowing an embodied or visceral logic of decolonisation to emerge.

The Safe Ethical Space—a space of normative ethical standards and considerations—functions as a silencer, even in close collaborative settings. It is entangled with colonised mindsets and enables the creators of images and texts to stabilise stereotypes and reproduce structural power imbalances through dismissing alternative narratives because they supposedly compromise autonomy and free expression, or are unethical. However, one central question remains in order to consider the structures upholding the coloniality of knowledge production: who is the assessor of ethical quality and how does their position in the colonial matrix of power affect their judgement of the Other and their knowledge?

Our empirical material joins discourses in a hierarchical, racialised system of power and domination. What we express and practice is not a single phenomenon of an individual, but an entanglement in the phenomena of the processes of modernity/(de)coloniality (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013). Gry and Helen had understood the theories within which they were working, but implementing them within their own realities without the destabilisation or rupture caused by Zahra's presence and utterance about her experience of the chador would risk a furthering of colonial knowledge production and simply echo their well-meaning intentions.

Where the Stones Landed

During this inquiry, we were challenged to work beyond field-specific norms of ethical accountability to allow for pluralistic knowledge production. This inquiry indicates that normative ethical conduct from the divergent fields of artist practice and educational research converge in their outcomes. Both fields avoid grappling with complex power relationships by deploying ethical accountability to protect both the artistic and academic positions of power.

Our well-meaning intentions, positioned to defend the Other, can backfire to further entrench colonising structures if unchallenged. Our collective work beyond the Safe Ethical Space to decolonise knowledge is challenging, risky, uncomfortable, at times painful, and by no means assured of success. However, it has allowed us to collaboratively contest histories, narratives, and spaces and raise questions about our own positions within the colonial matrix of power in our processes and quest for decolonisation. Our words and images intra-act through a critical perspective to destabilise ethical boundaries decided by existing power structures.

Our differing starting positions inform our divergent interpretations of *MIL-The mosque as an inclusive force in the local community* [3]. It's almost inconceivable that Zahra can interpret it that way when Gry has an entirely different intention. Neither has the universal objective truth about the picture. How does Zahra arrive at these thoughts, including the perception of women wearing chadors as oppressed and without their own will, in her own story? What invades Zahra's consciousness is an ongoing undesired colonial historical memory, evoked by the animation [3]. These images have been carved into our collective embodied historical memory for so long that they have become symbols of something more than clothing. The subtle power of the image in the animation allows us to reproduce stereotypes despite well-meaning intentions (of helping and giving voice to silenced minorities) and to disregard underlying colonising implications. We needed to take issue with the ethical substance of experience and intervene with how narrative, discourse, and art are normatively reproduced as if they were devoid of ideological and historical agency.

When discussing [3], Gry asks a central question: are her thoughts and expressions at all possible, or must they be compromised because of Zahra? In this complex issue, the question of free expression is not about Zahra and Gry's right to express themselves. We do not act as individuals; the relationship between us neither starts nor ends with us. In fact, some histories and spaces allow discourses to be repeated without obstruction and thereby be cemented as universal, embodied, and normative *truths* through the modernity/coloniality of

epistemologies and aesthetic productions (Khanna 2020; Mignolo and Vázquez 2013). At this moment in history, we liken these truths to a historical pandemic that surrounds us all and affects everyone around the globe. No one is free and beyond its sphere; neither the oppressor nor the oppressed. Furthermore, being the oppressed in any single context does not mean that one is liberated from the sedimentation of colonial truth.

How can we explore ethics and maintain opportunities for academic and artistic autonomy for different groups with different positions of power, whatever the context? The minimum ethical requirement may be that these images and discourses are taken up with those who have been subjected to stereotyping and demonisation. Our conviction is that we must question systems that support the global and Nordic continuation of colonial practice and knowledge production. The ethical response-ability of knowledge producers in all fields is to raise issues with ourselves and individuals in positions of power such as politicians, artists, and academics and strive towards a pluralistic knowledge production. We insist on the need for open discussions in professional arenas as well as in public spaces where everyone is held accountable for their words and deeds in coloniality's entangled matrix of power.

NOTES

1   All authors have contributed equally to this article.

2   Ethical Guidelines for Research (Norway) Accessed April 1, 2020. https://www.etikkom.no/en/ethical-guidelines-for-research/general-guidelines-for-research-ethics/ and Vetenskapsrådet Forskningsetiska principer. Accessed April 1, 2020. (Sweden) http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf

3   Svensson (2020, 34) uses concepts of marked and unmarked racialisation. Marked racialisation is the construction of the non-normative body that usually occurs to non-whites. However, it is not always equal to a reduction of privileges, for instance a white person of European origin in a group of non-white people is markedly racialised but continues to reap the benefits of white privilege. Furthermore, the most common and highly valued form of racialisation which occurs to the white body, its language as well as aesthetics is unmarked. Svensson draws on a concept of whitened which she describes through the word whitening which emphasizes that all forms of racialisation, marked as well as unmarked, are human constructions. Those who are whitened attain their privilege by it.

4   The concept was in frequent use in the project an *Inclusive Cultural Sector in the Nordics* were the reference group Critical Friends was established with the objective to highlight artists and cultural workers with non-western knowledges and competencies. Critical Friends's mandate had an advisory function in other networks/institutions/organisations created through the project and contributions at conferences and seminars. Accessed April 1, 2020. https://www.kulturradet.no/inkludering/vis/-/aktivitetar-og-initiativ-i-inkluderande-kulturliv-i-norden-prosjektet.

5   For a wider understanding of apparatus see Barad (2007, 140-208).

6   Chador: A specific type of covering for Iranian women.

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