PARSE

Dressing and Undressing Whiteness

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Abstract
In this conversation we enter into a discussion that allows the symbolic and discursive power of the image to challenge our entangled embodied colonised positions. By doing so we explore we are more complex and entangled than the stereotypes of ourselves and each other that inform our individual scripts taken from the cultural archive.

The departure point for this conversation is based on a selection of excerpts from our film *Silencing and Slicing*(2021). We share this discussion to bring the reader closer to our working processes and thoughts and themes. Our conversation is part of a process focused on racializing violence such as that we see through the image in the film, where this is amplified through sound and movement and the embodied presence of the voice through layers and projections. The film becomes a site that penetrates the tight knot of modernity/coloniality.

In our conversation, life as teachers, researchers and parents, entangles with metaphor, symbol and theoretical complexities to suggest a condition of being that we name pluralist proximity. Here our diverse positions located in different historical narratives are contested as they converge. We persist through inner and outer conflicts, a commonality in all collective endeavors. We try to stay with the pain that the consciousness of coloniality brings with it and transverse binaries of historical understandings of victim and perpetrator.

The film is in English and partially subtitled.

This conversation took place during the summer of 2022. We sat by ourselves, engrossed in our individual contemplations about the Slicing and Silencing film we made in late 2021, in collaboration with film-maker Roozbeh Behtaji. We started to talk about how it continued to relate to our lives and work experiences.

Tenderness with the White Costume

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Solmaz Collective, *Silencing and Slicing,* 2021@ Zahra Bayati, Helen Eriksen and Gry O. Ulrichsen

Zahra: There's a rabbit here. It reminds me a lot of the scene in the film. It's terrified even though it's completely fenced off in a big cage, and nothing can get in. When I open the cage door to give it carrots or water, it goes off and hides, and when I close the door again, it observes at a distance and then it hesitantly comes forward and eats the carrot.

Yes, I think a lot about that scene, Helen! When you put on that rabbit costume. And I thought even more about when Gry carefully dresses you in the costume. Whiteness dresses whiteness. Isn't that a remarkable scene? I didn't realise that you'd done that scene you did it yourselves before I got there. What were you thinking?

Zahra was in a house outside Copenhagen keeping a rabbit company.

Gry was in Trondheim packing to go on holiday in the North of Norway.

Helen was in Larvik listening to the bees pollinating her oregano.

Helen: Yeah, I remember we did it before you'd finished teaching. In the beginning, the whole dressing up as a rabbit thing was fun, but after five minutes, it wasn't much fun anymore. I'm over the rabbit thing now. But when we were making the film, the rabbit resurfaced, and I really didn't want to be the rabbit. I felt physical resistance I just didn't want to. And Gry, she just pushed and pushed it. I thought, "NO! Not the rabbit again."

Zahra: When I look at the scene where Gry dresses you, she dresses you like a bride: very carefully, like dressing you up before a wedding ceremony. That costume fits you like a glove. You say you're stressed, but Gry looks confident and experienced and calms you down.

Helen: Yes, we did that intentionally. I remember we talked about doing it with a sort of reverence. It also comes across that way and when Gry put the ears on me, I could feel the moment. It was almost like being crowned when she held the rabbit ears above my head, but Roozbeh said it didn't look right. It wasn't saying what we wanted it to in the first take because I bowed my head a queen wouldn't do that during a coronation, would she? I had to keep my head straight and my eyes fixed ahead.

The frightened rabbit modus can be seen as a metaphor for White fragility and innocence that limits White emotional engagement in a knowledge conflict. However, the silence that is produced is an enabler for pacified colonial mindsets.[1]

Gry: Yes, there's a lot of care in these actions, in these hands. I helped Helen get ready and equip her in some way. That makes it difficult because caring is genuine and something we need in our relationships. This narcissistic love is part of how whiteness works when I dress Helen up. It's not just about protection or her privileges. It's also a genuine love for the person I am dressing.

Zahra: Love for whom?

Gry: Whiteness loves or cares about what it can relate to, and it is sort of like loving your own reflection. It's greater than the individual though; individual caring feeds into the structure of White supremacy. I thought about what happened when we presented the film at another more recent conference. We insisted on talking about whiteness, and someone reacted to the focus on skin colour. I think they felt hurt that minoritised positions were neglected when we focused on whiteness. For me, this turmoil and urge to protect are both actions of this narcissist form of love! Perhaps a misunderstanding of the concept of whiteness.

Zahra: Yes, isn't it like a White mother whose children are somewhere between White and non-White and are perceived as non-White? The mother protects her child by wearing the White outfit so that the children won't be affected by racism. At the same time, the mother doesn't want to break with the structure to which a White mother has access to protect her children.

Helen: Yes, I suppose you're right there; that the mother is White is exactly what it's all about. It's a point from which to understand race and like Gry and me, I suppose? When you're White, and your privilege is invisible to yourself, you don't understand what you're doing, and that's what's truly terrifying and something you don't really want to think about.

What have I done what am I doing?

Zahra: Is it the same thing that you and Gry do for me?

Helen, you've criticised yourself a number of times for acting like a paralysed and scared rabbit. When you've tried to protect me when you've seen me or someone else being subjected to racism.

The White Monologue in Knowledge Production

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Gry: It seems as if there's a growing acceptance in schools, the field of practice, that the curriculum isn't neutral. It's been accepted as ideological, value-based and political to a certain degree. So, now we will work actively with anti-racism in compulsory education. We do have recent guidelines for this. But colleges and universities

are not on the ball because they are still dominated by notions of academic freedom, neutrality and objectivity. Universality is still a prevailing ideal.

Zahra: But Gry, I disagree; they haven't come that far yet. Teachers still assess students individually and focus on the relationship between children and their attitudes.

Gry: Yes, you might be right. I was just at a meeting with the principal of my children's school. Do you remember the incident when they were teaching Islam?

Helen: What happened?

Gry: Well, in short, the teacher used the TV series På tro og Are as an introduction to Islam. It's a recommended teaching resource for the third to fifth-grade "Society and Religion" curriculum.

The intro for all episodes churns out stereotypes of Muslims through their clothes, swords and guns. The narrative is built around a 50-plus White male atheist looking at different religions to challenge his own prejudices. The wise man thinks he has had a thorough experience of being a Muslim. He shows how a Muslim family is typical despite differences. The father of that family is shown as the caretaker of the religious part, but it's actually just one of a million ways to be Muslim. It would be easy to analyse that episode as an example of Islamic teaching and stereotypes.

"Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at ourselves, at Others, and at society. Third, 'Whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed."[2] (Frankenberg, 1993)

White is capitalised to denote a racialising power position. White denotes a status in the racial hierarchy. Whiteness is not capitalised because, like pluralist proximity, it is considered a state of being.

He describes encounters with irony, sarcasm and a lot of subtexts intended for a much older audience. I'm thinking about the images in the intro: it's a montage of clips from the news and documentaries the twin towers are burning, jihadists are waving black flags, and Osama bin Laden is on his knees with guns to the back of his head. Against this backdrop, we see Sylvi Listhaug and George Bush talking about winning the war on terror.

My child was so upset when they saw it at the beginning of their religious education lesson.

Zahra: Yes! I remember it quite clearly.

Gry: Yes, he was serious when he asked, "Are all Muslims terrorists? Are they?"

Zahra: Just imagine getting a question like that from your child!

Gry: I contacted the teacher, after I was told about it, with some suggestions for other educational resources. The teacher thanked me but said nothing about leaving that particular series out of their teaching plan. The

intention was to use it as a recognisable format to introduce lessons about different religions and belief systems. The series actually caused a public debate, and the Buddhist association even filed an official complaint about it...

It took a while before I said anything to my husband. I probably didn't tell him because I knew how offended and upset he'd be. When he asked for a meeting with the headmaster, the teacher and myself, they told him I had already had a constructive dialogue with the teacher about this. The headmaster also argued that he didn't see any problem with the episode and that it was on a well-recognised educational channel. After some White validation from me in yet another email, the tone changed: "Of course, we could have a meeting; welcome!"

What unfolded next at that meeting was strange but typical in my experience. The argument was that an individual experience was not to be taken as a generalisation, and it wasn't something the school could take on board because the other parents or students from similar backgrounds hadn't reacted.

NRK, På Tro og Are,1. episode, 2013 (still) @ NRK

As a matter of principle, the headmaster wouldn't decide or intervene in the teachers' choice of learning resources. And I fully agree that management shouldn't control teachers, but the question that I asked, again and again, was: What can the student's reaction teach us? What can the parents' response teach us as a school?

What can we, as the majority, learn from feedback from a minoritised student or parent racialised as non-White?

The principal's answer was repeated: it's a two-way learning process. We will learn, and they will learn. This student must learn to tolerate being represented in this way, and they must learn to accept it.

Helen: It sounds like you were drawn into something or other; I mean, he was the headteacher and had to protect his teachers.

Gry: You can point at the school, but you cannot point at the individual actions of the teachers in the power structure.

Helen: It's precisely what we can recognise from the teachers´ common room at school when we were working as teachers, isn't it? When a student makes a complaint about a teacher, the teachers gang up together to protect one of their own against the student.

It's fascinating this aspect of teaching for teacher trainers: why do the teachers feel that they've got to form an effective protective ring rather than discuss criticism? It's impossible for a single student to be critical of teaching or have ideas about how they need to be taught. It's the way the system works.

Gry: It's like the scene from the film: the headmaster dresses the teacher up in the White rabbit suit, time after time. It's about tenderness for someone being vulnerable, as a teacher always is. And even when my husband is in the room, the care for the teacher, the need to protect the teacher, and their choices are obvious.

A student had contacted Zahra to ask for advice because she had failed a course because she spoke English with an Arabic accent. Zahra sent an email to the lecturer suggesting that an exam failure because of an Arabic accent was unjust, as all English speakers have an accent.

Zahra received no response, but she later found out that an email defending the original grade was sent to the student from administration and the head of department.

It's difficult to argue against the principles of freedom and teacher autonomy. When I was sitting there, and he said all that, I completely understood. But how were we supposed to talk about what was happening? How can we address it as a problem? And then, when it happens again, it's still not a problem because only one person speaks up. Very few other students from Muslim backgrounds are in the class, and it's not surprising that they didn't ask for a meeting.

Gry: I also spoke to some other parents, and they said: I've asked my children, and they don't think that all Muslims are terrorists because they had a conversation after the film about how there is a lot of prejudice and it doesn't apply to everyone.

Zahra: Ha, ha, they've been introduced to Islam by learning that some Muslims are terrorists, but not all of them.

Gry: The effect of racist and stereotyping teaching resources is amplified with repeated images along with what's

said in the film; all this has an immediate impact that, in a way, cancels the apparently reflective conversation the children had after the film, because the images are repeated in the next lesson and not discussed again because they've already done that.

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.[3] 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.[4]

Zahra: Even your child will doubt themself and his father's faith after such a film… they would want to distance themselves from that stereotype.There's some research on children starting school in Sweden I don't know what it's like in Norway but Sweden's largest cities have completely segregated areas, where over 90% of the residents originate from non-European countries. In other places, it's vice versa; over 90% are White Swedes or Europeans. In areas where these two different areas but up against each other, some children live in villas in predominately White neighbourhoods, and others live in high-rise buildings and have a non-European background. Both can go to the same school. Several studies show that non-White children want to have "real Swedish friends"; some even actively do not want to have friends from their area but prefer being with "Swedes". Some also want a name that won't link them to Islam. I wonder if it is not very similar to what your child felt and expressed in this case: they don't want to be the person portrayed in the film. They want to be normal, like others.

Helen: I have a friend who says she's very happy that she was brought up in an African country where she's always seen as an individual. Being brought up here, she would have been categorised through skin colour all the time. It's difficult, psychologically, to go from being yourself to being invisible or being seen as a specific category or stereotype. She says there's no room for manoeuvre; everything is misread.

She just isn't seen, and she tells me that for her, Norway is not a meritocracy at all it doesn't matter what she does to fit in.

Gry: Yes, and then we're back to that rabbit appearing because we're with you, Zahra. Both in the situation where we're together in a larger research community, and among us when the three of us are together. In the situation when we were looking at the animation of the women in the bunk beds wearing chadors, the metaphorical rabbit appears. Helen, we didn't say anything; we just stayed silent. But when you, Zahra, are there, racialised as non-White, in a position of power, and as our supervisor, it means that we can't bypass the fear that the silence and rabbit represent. We have to do something about it.

But in my child's school, no one in a position of power is racialised as non-White. In the structure where there's only White power, you don't have the opportunity to understand that the rabbit is present. Don't you think?

We recall art educational gatherings in which we participated, and racial conflicts to which we responded through our collective research practice.

Here we saw the racial conflicts from the educational gatherings echoed. However, in the context of the gatherings, the conflict was amplified.[5]

Zahra: When I think about my life in Sweden as a non-White parent, student, and later as a researcher, I have also met non-Whites who say they don't recognise the racism we're talking about, or you're exaggerating otherwise; racism also exists among us immigrants.

I wonder if this is like becoming a scared rabbit and wanting to put on the White suit to avoid being even more excluded from groups and power or structures?

Helen: There's something about these systems of power. When you're on the outside, it's terribly difficult to get inside them. It's like a vault with complicated codes to break. I often think about the White vault that I am in when we talk about racism. It's the same situation we saw in academia when you're allowed into the vault but not seen or valued.

Gry, do you think your child will understand the structures better because they are raised with parents of different identities? Is whiteness also part of them?

And this is also really frightening! Don't all children want to fit in and be welcomed? It boils down to a conflict and a divide-and-conquer scenario through the double identity or consciousness! It´s the stable White identity that holds the key to accepting.

Recycling Whiteness

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Zahra: In the film, we flip through books, and we see how you and Helen make a collage using my family to tell a story and illustrate a point about us, just like when the national broadcasting company, NRK, make their visual narrative about Muslims. It backfires; therefore, we have to conclude that it is about a system and not individuals who become good or evil. There's a system of written books and knowledge resources that reproduces itself.

The Stones between Our Hands

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Solmaz Collective, *Silencing and Slicing,* 2021@ Zahra Bayati, Helen Eriksen and Gry O. Ulrichsen

Helen: The stones come in as a disruption from another space. You're not supposed to completely understand them. It's a bit like when I started wearing the rabbit costume; they animate something or other in both me and the viewer. Something is happening, but we're not sure what or why: it's beyond articulation. A question, perhaps?

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness [...] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[6]

Zahra: Do you mean the scene when we're swapping stones in our hands?

Helen: Yes, in the scene when we're exchanging stones, we're disturbing each other, aren't we? Disturbing our separated lives and how we experience things as we exchange them.

We're doing it in pluralist proximity, but when I made the first animation with the stones, it was about a disturbing experience. When pluralist proximity first hits and challenges our White identity, it's confusing. You don't know where it's all coming from, and there are so many questions what's really happening here?

Zahra: You can just imagine how much pain and energy the non-European has to endure so that you can experience your own White identity.

Helen: Yes! We feel how painful this is for you, and it's alarming when we realise that we are causing it. But it's difficult to acknowledge at first because White shame silences us like when you told us you had worn a chador in Iran.

"Zahra told us that as a child, she had worn a chador. [...] the rock hanging precariously over the women's heads became a powerful symbol of something else [...] 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."[5]

It's also like the email you sent to your colleague about how they were using language to categorise students in a colonial racial hierarchy. It must have been the first time they had ever heard that argument because they failed students. Any teacher does their best not to fail students. To fail a student because of a dialect or foreign accent is unbelievable and belongs to the colonial idea of normative "queen's" English. It's really a 1950s attitude. We don't do that anymore in the UK I hope. We know she changed her mind because of her actions, even though her colleagues had sent the email defending her original decision to fail the student. She regraded the exam to a pass. I think when you sent that email, you threw a huge stone at them, didn't you?

You're breaking into the White vault, and the stone makes all the timid little rabbits come together. They start talking and say, "we ARE correct, but someone threw a little stone that didn't hurt any of us; perhaps we have to look a little closer at this, but we won't say anything because we don't know how to say it!"

It was those critical questions that Zahra sent her that gave her a tool to change her mind. But she couldn't acknowledge Zahra's role in this because she couldn't face that difficult discussion. It remains unarticulated, then. This is what I often feel myself when I throw a stone into the system when I criticise something. The system is silent but makes itself felt in other ways.

Zahra: One thing I thought of when you talked about different accents or dialects belonging to the 1950s is because you know that history because you're, among other things, an English woman. But imagine if you think of yourself as a good person, always doing your best, then someone throws stones at that structure and the glass ceiling of perception, and questions your teaching courses, the course literature and the entire education system.

Gry: The stone is several things; one thing is when you throw it at the glass ceiling, and another is when you throw it at someone or into a group. Suddenly it's a stone instead of carrots, and then you get a little confused. But the stone has another function in the scene where we are holding and swapping stones.

The Eurocentric construction of knowledge affected the education systems of many formerly colonised countries beyond Europe.[7] It has contributed to creating hierarchical relations between different languages similar to the colonial racial hierarchies, placing the white language at the pinnacle.[8] In these systems, subordinate positions are given to individuals and groups who belong to what Edward Said calls the discursive Other. Their knowledge and language are seen as subordinate. In an education system built around a dominant language, the languages of minorities and "immigrants" remain invisible. They can even be perceived as negative and as obstacles to learning the dominant language.[9]

Helen: Yes…There's something about the stones. The stones are still themselves. There's something about our hands and how we catch them from each other. It's sort of like when you take criticism and feedback, and a real discussion happens. That real discussion changes you; you realise your racial position.

It's a different, more profound type of discussion that goes to the core of racial identity. That's why the stones are articulating something. We can hear their sound when they meet between our hands.

Zahra: Isn't that where pluralist proximity happens?

Helen: Yes, I believe so; that's pluralist proximity talking. That's the sound and image of it.

Zahra, when you refer to "pluralist proximity" in that scene, I understand it as a human condition, not a concept or a method. It's communication at a level beyond the instrumental. It's a way of being together that you must accept in larger or smaller groups, perhaps even in academic or art groups.

Zahra: One thing I have been thinking about is that pluralist proximity is not the same as those who talk about whether we should be together. We're different and should be kind and talk to each other, like the hippie and flower power ideas.

It's possible to discuss among us (Zahra, Gry and Helen) because we're prepared to admit that injustice exists, and that we benefit from the colonialist ordering of power relationships. We try to remain in this painful recognition.

Gry: The argument that it's more complex than race alone is one we're often faced with, and you get it in a different form Zahra. This requirement of complexity, I think, "OK, then just look at all the low-paid workers with no status, cleaners, taxi drivers and the like. Who is doing that sort of work? How complex is it, really?"

Zahra: Yes, who gets a share of the welfare and security in our contemporary Scandinavian countries? Around the 1960s 1970s, the issue of sexuality was brought into the public arena. But homosexuality was still treated as a fault or a disease, and it seems that the sexual revolution may have obscured gay rights. Thankfully, after many struggles, there is now a self-evident right to define sexuality and gender in Scandinavian countries, even though there's still work to be done in these areas.

Helen: Yes, but I'm thinking a little about the criticism you came up with, Zahra, that pluralist proximity can look like a hippy-ish being-together type of activity. And I do see how it can look like that from the outside. But isn't that a really simple way of understanding how we are approaching our work together? What I'm most concerned about is the idea of responsibility. And that responsibility is not a transient condition. Being together is not just a matter of sitting next to each other in the same room. We are together in something, a type of struggle or condition perhaps? Much more than a specific place or location. Does that make sense?

Zahra: Yes, I understand what you mean.

Helen: We do have a responsibility to and for each other.

Gry: That started me thinking of Deeyah Khans' film.

Pluralist proximity is a condition of being. We find that it creates a space where colonising and racialising identities can be contested.

Helen: Yes, what was she thinking about when she sat listening to those White supremacists for three weeks? It is much more than a feel-good moment for her as a film-maker. Perhaps she has a greater responsibility to herself and those who look like her.

Zahra: Yes, exactly

Gry: Khan talks about fear, that she's been so afraid all her life. During the film, she is with people she is scared of and uses the camera as a shield.

Zahra: What happened in the end?

Gry: As a result of that sort of togetherness, you mean?

Zahra: Yes

Gry: After being in Deeyah's film, the leader left the White supremacist movement. He's totally transformed. He's working with the counter-radicalisation of right-wing extremists now.

Zahra: A sunshine story as well.

Helen: I have thought a lot about this. How do we act responsibly when things are almost impossibly complex and perhaps dangerous, and the system works to silence you?

Europe and the US were full of anti-Semites before World War II. Just think: it took genocide for Europe to understand that anti-Semitism is unacceptable! Think, being a single witness is an individual act dismissed as anecdotal and dangerous in some conditions. Still, when thousands of people give evidence of the same experience, it is brought together as data sets or facts. Your single experience doesn't count until someone else can verify it. So, the system works to silence the individual.

Zahra: Probably, in the beginning, they told the Jews that they were oversensitive and that what they felt was individual and subjective.

Helen: I just read what Hanna Arendt wrote about the Eichmann trial.[10] During the process, she calls him an idiot because he continually says he was just doing his job, which he just so happened to be very good at. He was pleasant to the rabbis inviting them to dinner to discuss his plans. He even persuaded some rabbis to lead their people into the cattle wagons without resistance. He didn't understand his responsibility for his fellow humans because he worked in a system that dehumanised specific categories of people. He really was a systemic idiot.

We still hear I was just doing my job! Don't we? Some people never question the workings of the system they're part of. Arendt shows how destructive, yes lethal, this attitude can be.

Zahra: Yes, it is something that we do as teachers, "just doing my job." I will work with this course and was given this curriculum and literature.

Gry: Yes, racism transforms into many different forms. Even if there is a growing recognition by teachers and researchers in higher education, structural racism also moves from the classroom to the administration. The administration sits with an apparently neutral interpretation of the regulations. There is a belief that regulations are based on a fundamental idea of an existing meritocracy. Although many people feel they want to work for equity, strict adherence to rules is an obstacle.

Zahra: That's just it: in higher education, everything is nice, neutral and objective.

We all looked into our cameras and laughed.

Red Table talk, Extreme Violence: Inside the Minds of People Who Hate, 2022 (still) @ Red Table tal

Footnotes

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