

On Being a Space Invader and The Thing Around My Neck: Navigating White Educational Space as a (Muslim)

Researcher of Colour

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Abstract

This article presents itself as an autoethnographic reflection on my positionality as a veiled, South African Muslim of Cape Malay descent and lower middle class background, attempting to navigate access to white educational space, as part of my doctoral research in Flemish primary schools. I explore what it means to be racialized as ‘other’ whilst also assuming a position of ‘authority’ as researcher, and occupying a particular space (positioned as neutral and secular) as a ‘body out of place’ (Puwar, 2004), in which a symmetry can be seen between myself and those categorised as ‘other’. The aim of this article is to reflect on how this occurs through certain processes, namely: (in)visibilisation; reprimanding; compartmentalisation; and, interpellation. I also reflect on the body of the anthropologist and the idea of the ‘objective researcher’ in order to illuminate how the mechanisms of racialization work. I engage the ensuing psychological burden brought about by the encounter with the ‘white gaze’ (Fanon, 2008). As a complement to the autoethnography, I make use of literary fiction as a method of analysis, in order to highlight the way in which literature can stimulate the formation of analytical insights (see Craith & Kockel, 2014) and, I draw on film.

Keywords: methodological whiteness, habits of seeing, education, white gaze, autoethnography

Here We Go, Again: (In)visibilisation

He explained that according to the ‘GO!’ regulations, religious symbols were neither allowed nor tolerated at school. The idea was that children should be allowed to be children and there should be no undue influence upon them ... He said there were enough problems with religion outside of the school ... He also spoke about needing to set a good example for the children. It seemed quite clear to me that this could not come from me as a (visible) Muslim. (Field notes, October 2016)

The excerpt above refers to the meeting I had with a principal of a primary school in a Belgian metropolitan city, involved in a project that had as an explicit aim, the creation of a better ‘social mix’ in schools thought to have a ‘concentration’ of pupils of foreign descent, by attracting white, middle class families. I had initially hoped to carry out my research on equal opportunity and diversity in education at one of these schools, but all except one, declined my request for an interview to discuss my work. Despite the numerous declines, I felt hopeful. During the interview, however, we spent more time discussing why he could not permit me to wear my *hijab*. In the end, he asked me to consider removing my headscarf and if that condition was met, he would present my project at the next staff meeting, as he needed the teachers to be ‘on board’. After much painful deliberation, but before the staff meeting was to take place, I agreed to remove my headscarf. In the end, however, he declined to be part of my research. A while after our meeting, an Open Day was held at the school. I decided it would still be useful to attend for the sake of my research, even if I would not be conducting my fieldwork at the school. When I arrived, the principal handed me a form to fill in. When I read it, it was clear that it was a form intended for parents wishing to enrol their children in the school. I was initially confused by this and thought perhaps it was for informative purposes. I filled in my details and ‘not applicable’ where necessary. During the tour of the school, it became evident that the principal thought I was a prospective parent. It was then that I realized he didn’t recognize me. The reality of the Flemish context struck me: women in *hijab* are either highly visible or completely invisible. We had had a meeting for at least half an hour; I had spent many days agonizing over his request; but to him I was just another Muslim woman in a headscarf. The veil, in essence, spoke for my body. He could not see beyond it.

In *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* Nirmal Puwar develops the term ‘space invaders’¹ to highlight the way in which certain bodies are not welcome in particular spaces. Puwar builds on Charles Mill’s conception of the white male body as the “somatic norm” (See Puwar, 2004, p. 33). This position, of being unwelcome in particular spaces, is rooted in the way in which spaces are imbued with particular socio-political histories. These histories imply that there are certain bodies who belong or deserve to be in positions of power, while there are others, who do not.²

In her short story, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Adichie’s protagonist, Akunna, a young Nigerian woman, who after coming to America, suffers from a deep sense of alienation that is almost suffocating (Adichie, 2010). This sense of alienation is borne of a mixture of culture shock and the racism she experiences. She is also burdened with the weight of self-consciousness and of her experiences not being understood. Her white boyfriend, for example, despite his openness and good intentions, is largely ignorant of what it’s like for her to be a foreigner in America. I felt a great affinity with Puwar’s space invader. Similarly, in Chimamanda’s protagonist, I recognised a thing around my own neck, continuously threatening to suffocate and prevent me from just being. I cannot simply ‘be’ in the world as my white counterparts can. I am continuously burdened with the weight of doubt even in the face of evidence to the contrary. The weight of not being accepted. Of being doubted so much that I start to doubt my own capabilities.

This article presents itself as an autoethnographic reflection on my positionality as a veiled, South African Muslim of Cape Malay³ descent and lower middle class background, attempting to navigate access to white educational space, as part of my doctoral research in Flemish primary schools. I explore what it means to be racialized as ‘other’ whilst also assuming a position of ‘authority’ as researcher, and occupying a particular space (positioned as neutral and secular) as a ‘body out of place’ (Puwar, 2004), in which a symmetry can be seen between myself and those categorised as ‘other’. The aim of this article is to reflect on how this occurs through certain processes, namely: (in)visibilisation (as I described through the vignette above); reprimanding; compartmentalisation; and, interpellation. I also reflect on the body of the anthropologist and the idea of the ‘objective researcher’ in order to illuminate how the mechanisms of racialization work. I engage the ensuing psychological burden brought about by the encounter with the ‘white gaze’ (Fanon, 2008). As a complement to the autoethnography, I make use of literary fiction as a method of analysis, in order to highlight the way in which literature can stimulate the formation of analytical insights (see Craith & Kockel, 2014) and, I draw on film. In so doing, I expand on Nirmal Puwar’s work on the space invader by manifesting the various modalities and techniques through which a body is kept out of place.

Framing the Muslim Woman

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her seminal book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, exposes the hubris evident in the rescue narratives regarding The Oppressed Muslim Woman (buttressed by voyeuristic media representations) and analyses the political underpinnings dictating the circumstances of their lives and the limitations on their freedoms (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Similarly, focusing on the European context, Joan Scott in *The Politics of the Veil*, manifests the racism evident in French views towards the veil and within the underpinnings of French secularism itself. Muslim women who choose to veil are

¹ The term ‘space-invader’ was originated by Doreen Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) in her description of her experience entering a deeply masculinised space.

² Many years ago, I attended a debate on affirmative action, open to the public, held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town. Two University of Cape Town academics, Professor David Benatar and Zimitri Erasmus, were at opposing ends of the argument. The gist of Professor Benatar’s argument was that affirmative action meant that black academics would never know whether they had been hired because they were deserving of the position, or because they were black, and that the university therefore ran the risk of being filled with mediocre black professionals. Then senior lecturer, Zimitri Erasmus, responded to this by assuring Professor Benatar that there were plenty of white mediocre professors at the University of Cape Town. For some in the crowd, this was a moment of triumph. Zimitri Erasmus had presented a challenge to the status quo of white professors’ legitimacy at the university. Although it has been well over a decade since this event took place, the heated exchange has remained prominent in my mind; and, while this vignette speaks to the way in which ‘excellence’ is linked with ‘whiteness,’ it is also suggestive of what Puwar (2004, p.59) has identified as the ‘burden of doubt’. She argues that although women and People of Colour “endure all the trials and tribulations involved in becoming a professional, they are still not automatically assumed to have the required competencies” (Puwar, 2004, p.59).

³ Cape Malay is a sub-category of the apartheid designation ‘Coloured,’ referring to the Cape Muslim community who are descended from slaves and political prisoners from the Indonesian Archipelago, and other South East Asian countries, brought to the Cape during Dutch colonial rule, and who intermarried with Africans, Europeans, Indians and Arabs amongst other groups. Although ‘Cape Malay’ is a contested term, it remains in use within the Cape Muslim community, and I use it here to reflect the broader (historical) dimensions of my identity.

seen as having fallen prey to “false consciousness.” They are not permitted to attribute meaning to their sartorial choices, but rather, this meaning is decided for them (Scott, 2009). Sara Farris’ *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* makes the connection between racialized and sexualised labour and the implications for the handling of Muslim (migrant) women. Under the banner of “women’s rights,” Farris argues, feminists and right-wing political parties form an unlikely alliance in the convergence of their Islamophobic discourses, which have both political and economic ramifications (Farris, 2017).

In her article, *Taming the Muslim Woman*, Nadia Fadil argues that in the work of Scott and Farris, the Muslim woman comes across “as a passive figure who serves as ideological backdrop for a series of broader governmental transformations” (2018, para. 8). For Fadil, a further representation is evident. She elaborates on the analyses of Scott and Farris, by suggesting an alternative discourse relating to the Muslim woman, that of the Muslim woman as “a cunning figure.” It is precisely because of her naiveté that she is seen as ‘possessing redeemable qualities’—unlike the Muslim male who is viewed as irredeemable—that she is also seen as a potential threat. We can see the characterization of this ambivalence, argues Fadil, in the way that the *hijab* and *niqab* have been interpreted (particularly in France and Belgium) not only as symbols of oppression but also as (dangerous) political ideologies. (Fadil, 2018). The Muslim woman’s redemption thus rests on the removal of these symbols of ‘danger’ and ‘oppression’ - in other words, her full assimilation into European society through the adoption of (secular) European values and her embodiment of the ‘archetypal’ Western woman. When she denies this (altruistic) offer of redemption by holding onto Islam, her actions are seen as a deep violation, a betrayal (Fadil, 2018).

A consideration of how Muslim women have been discursively framed within European society (and elsewhere), is central in understanding how I, as a veiled Muslim researcher, was perceived by my interlocutors. In the next section, I critically reflect on the body of the anthropologist and the ‘objective researcher,’ before returning to processes of racialization.

Where Does Objectivity Live?

In a lecture titled *Over de dekolonisatie van de sociale wetenschappen: “It is not possible for me to be objective”*⁴ (On the decolonisation of the social sciences: “It is not possible for me to be objective”) Nadia Fadil meticulously identifies the predicament that the researcher of colour finds herself, through a discussion of the work of Fanon, who in *Black Skin, White Masks*—anticipating the potential criticism towards his work due to its unconventional style—remarked: “It is not possible for me to be objective.” It is not only the anticipated criticism that inspires Fanon to make this claim. He is very much aware of the fact, argues Fadil, that were he to follow the conventional methods of his discipline, his ‘objectivity’ would be called into question (Fadil, 2019). The question would arise because of his blackness. Fadil argues, for example: When a native provides an insight, it is a “testimony,” an “experience.” When a (white) anthropologist presents the same facts, one speaks of an “observation” or an “insight” (Fadil, 2019).

In a broader discussion concerning the so called ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences, and drawing a comparison between quantitative studies where ‘objectivity’ can be located within the techniques and instruments of measurement, and anthropology, where the indicators of objectivity cannot be deployed via ‘instruments’ and interpretation is therefore integral, Fadil argues that the body becomes the primary instrument. The white body thus emerges as a guarantor of ‘objectivity’, while the black body is imbued with various meanings, experience, subjectivity. He cannot be a harbinger of ‘objective’ truth. In essence, it is the whiteness of the researcher’s body that guarantees his neutrality (Fadil, 2019).

In his article *Bending over backwards: dismantling toxic ‘opportunities’* Divine Fuh notes the way in which scholars from the African continent have to jump through proverbial hoops in order to not only pursue opportunities at European universities, but show their gratefulness for being given a reprieve from the ‘affliction’ of being African and having to exist within these parameters (Fuh, 2019). This, of course, has to do with the de-valuing of knowledge produced by African scholars. Fuh takes issue with the fact that white academics operate within a hierarchical system of knowledge production which they in their ‘innocence’ make no conscious effort to challenge. This according to him comes from a lack of empathy that would, if present, necessitate the valuing of subjective knowledge (Fuh, 2019, p. 265). Moreover, African scholars although neither understood nor valued, must bear the weight of making “fascinating initiatives”

⁴This lecture formed part of a series of talks under the theme “The Decolonial University.” Critical reflections on the academic world” that was organized on 4 April, 2019 by the Fatima Mernissi Chair (VUB) in Brussels.

pertaining to the African continent, put forth by white (Western) scholars, a success (Fuh, 2019, p. 266). Fuh here is referring to the way in which African scholars—whose Africanness must lend credence to postcolonial projects involving Africa put forth by white scholars—are expected to be grateful for the opportunity to travel to Europe and engage with European scholars, but who cannot expect compassion for their position of precarity.

In a similar vein, Gurminder Bhambra has put forward the concept of ‘methodological whiteness’. She argues that methodological whiteness is:

a way of reflecting on the world that fails to acknowledge the role played by race in the very structuring of that world, and of the ways in which knowledge is constructed and legitimated within it. It fails to recognise the dominance of ‘whiteness’ as anything other than the standard state of affairs and treats a limited perspective – that deriving from white experience – as a universal perspective. At the same time, it treats other perspectives as forms of identity politics explicable within its own universal (but parochial and lesser than its own supposedly universal) understandings. (2017, para. 6)

Bhambra’s articulation of ‘methodological whiteness’ presents a challenge to academics in the social sciences to earnestly reflect on the histories that have shaped the modern context and take these into account when interpreting social phenomena. The lack of such earnest reflection has only served to further entrench hierarchies in the production of knowledge in academia.

Another call for soberly confronting history, comes from Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Wekker critically confronts the dominant internal narrative about the Netherlands: that it is an ethical and non-racist nation; race is something located in distant places such as the United States and South Africa. At the same time racism is associated with the working class, and not with middle-class sensibilities (Wekker, 2016). There is thus a distancing from race and racism that takes place, which relies on ignorance of the colonial past and a protection of white privilege, what we might term ‘innocence’. Interestingly, although Wekker’s work is commended by an academic reviewer, for its richness and thought-provoking insights, the potential academic scepticism—for relying too much on personal experiences—is already identified as a shortcoming of her book (see, for example, Roitman, 2017). Wekker’s subjective experiences, although bringing light to the systemic and endemic racism present in the Netherlands and thereby taking seriously the experience of many (wo)men of colour, makes her work somehow less credible, less able to stand up to ‘real’ academic scrutiny. Thus we see the way in which the predicament highlighted by Fanon continues to present itself.

More recently, Maboula Soumahoro’s profound work *Le Triangle et l’Hexagone: Reflexions sur une identite noire* (Black is the Journey, Africana the Name) bravely rejects the so-called critical distance and illusion of scientific objectivity (Soumahoro, 2020, p. 20). Exploring the nature of black identity in France, she takes herself as a research subject. Soumahoro, having been born in France to Ivorian parents, shows compellingly how her experiences, as black child and then woman, reflect the experiences of a broader society - those characterised as France’s ‘Others’.

In this article I aim to contribute further to this body of literature to show the way in which the subjective knowledge of scholars of colour, rather than detracting from the scholarliness of their work, only provides a further dimension and richness to the analyses being made. In the remaining sections of this article, I draw on field research experiences that are emblematic of racializing processes upon the (anthropologist) body of colour.

Bodies Burdened and Out of Place: Reprimanding

At one of the schools in Flanders where I conducted part of my research, I was often treated in such a way that I left feeling completely infantilised. I would go to the class to which I had been assigned only to be told things like “There’s nothing for you to see here” or “Can you go somewhere else?” When I was allowed to stay the affirmation of my allowed presence would be through gritted teeth or half-hearted smiles. I also had to be useful. This was very clear from the outset. I was not allowed to simply be watching. In fact, watching is the domain of the white world. In her account of the way in which black bodies not only bear the ‘burden of doubt’ but are also subject to ‘super-surveillance’, Puwar quotes Fanon:

We had physicians, professors, statesmen. Yes, but something out of the ordinary still clung to such cases. “We have a Senegalese history teacher. He is quite bright. . . .Our doctor is colored. He is very gentle.” It was always the Negro

teacher, the Negro doctor; brittle as I was becoming, I shivered at the slightest pretext. I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. What could one expect, after all, from a Negro physician? As long as everything went well, he was praised to the skies, but look out, no nonsense, under any conditions! The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace. I tell you, I was walled in: No exception was made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of the quantum theory. (as cited in Puwar, 2004, p. 61-62)

I had the strong sense that the teachers at this particular school could not accept that I was in a position of ‘authority’, in terms of me ‘watching’ them: by taking on the role of observer, I had inverted the white gaze and placed myself in a position of power. This inversion seemed to account for their aggression towards me: belittling me was a way of reprimanding me for daring to take up the position of a powerful subject. And I was terrified of setting a foot wrong. I knew, like Fanon, that I would not have the luxury of being just a person who made a mistake, that it would be my ‘otherness’ that would count against me.

When I finally worked up the courage to tell the principal how difficult the teachers were making things for me—both personally and in terms of my ability to do my work—by relaying how they would turn their faces when I greeted them or ask me to go elsewhere when I was assigned to their classrooms, she responded by telling me that the teachers took their work very seriously and were therefore too busy to focus on being friendly. I had thus become the problem by naming the problem (Ahmed, 2012).

I turn now to *Jumping Monkey Hill*, another short story by Chimamanda Adichie, as well as Adichie’s personal experience, to highlight the way in which what counts as the ‘real,’ is deeply entangled in power relationships. In *Jumping Monkey Hill*, the protagonist, Ujunwa Ogondu, attends an African Writers Workshop held at a resort just outside Cape Town. The organiser of the workshop, an elderly white Oxford-trained Englishman and former University of Cape Town professor named Edward Campbell, informs the writers during his introduction, that a distinguished prize for African writing was his brainchild. He criticizes several of the writers’ stories for not being truly African and refers to it as ‘agenda writing’, implying that they are using their writing to serve their respective private ends. The irony is that several of the writers have based their short stories on their own experiences. More ironic still, is the fact that despite leering at the female participants and uttering sexually suggestive comments to them throughout the duration of the workshop, he rejects Ujunwa’s story about a Lagos woman who is expected to offer sexual favours in order to secure her job and says “‘It’s never quite like that in real life, is it? Women are never victims in that crude sort of way and certainly not in Nigeria. Nigeria has women in high positions. The most powerful cabinet minister is a woman’” (Adichie, 2010, p. 113-114).

Adichie’s short story is largely autobiographical and regarding her experience she is quoted as having thought: “This is the result of 200 years of history: we can sit here and be told what our story is” (Adichie, 2009). Fanon (2008, p. 24) equates ‘the white world’ with ‘the real world’ and Adichie drives this point home so vividly in *Jumping Monkey Hill*. The principal’s response to me at the white school seems to suggest that my experience was not part of the ‘real world’. The unwillingness of teachers to cooperate with me and refusing to return my greeting, was not seen as a symptom of their refusal to accept my presence as a researcher (rooted in racial and religious prejudice), but as my inability to see that they had little time for friendliness because of their strong work ethic. Placing the focus on me, rather than the teachers themselves, also served as a way of reprimanding me for transgressing the unspoken boundaries of our working relationship. I was given an opportunity to do my research at the school and I was expected to be grateful; I was not expected to complain.

The Veiled Body, The Religious Body: Compartmentalisation

At an interview at one of schools where I would eventually conduct my research, a teacher who was present during my interview with the principal, asked me several questions related to the headscarf and what it meant to Muslim women and Muslim societies in general. I felt ill-equipped to answer these questions, but I tried to do so to the best of my ability, trying very hard not to claim to speak for all Muslim women choosing to wear the headscarf. Both the principal and the teacher expressed surprise that my headscarf counted against me at other schools and I felt the atmosphere to be more open and welcoming. But then they asked whether I could give Islamic religious education classes. I emphasized that I was not trained in Islamic theology and would be unqualified for such an undertaking. There was an uncomfortable silence. They did not push the issue, but I found the request somewhat disturbing. I was grateful for the opportunity to have the interview and the warm atmosphere in which I was received, but at the same time I felt ‘fixed’ by their

expectations (Fanon, 2008, p. 87; see also Doharty, 2020). My body evidently was being interpreted in a particular way. While there exists no general prohibition on visible religious practices in Flemish schools, most schools adopt a strict regulation restricting this possibility amongst its staff.⁵ Confessional classes, organised for the adherents of the state-recognised religious denominations (including Islam) in public schools are the exemption.⁶ By asking me whether I could teach Islamic classes, I was seen as the only way the school could see me: as a teacher of Islamic theology, even though there was an openness to difference. There was no room for another kind of positioning, I could not—with my *hijab*—be understood otherwise. In other words, it was impossible to epistemologically think of me outside of religion. This is reflective of a secular world view in which knowledge is compartmentalised – religion cannot exist outside of its own domain, and therefore I, as a Muslim woman, could not exist outside of Islam.

In her 2010 article *The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis* Alia Al-Saji examines the way in which gender and race come together in the process of racialization of Muslims. Taking up the vociferous public debates surrounding the Muslim veil prompting the 2004 French law prohibiting ‘conspicuous’ religious signs or symbols in public schools, Al-Saji identifies the ‘cultural racism’ lurking behind debates on the veil. Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Linda Alcoff she argues that racist ways of seeing are connected to cultivated ‘fields of vision’ that are predicated upon habit.

Although the law banned ‘conspicuous’ religious signs, the debate in France, which saw a renewal in 2009, was completely focused upon Muslim women and the veil. This, argues Al-Saji, had much to do with the way in which (French) secularism has been constructed. She argues:

French secularism was built on a history of Christianity; that it has had to accommodate and coexist with Catholicism has meant, as some commentators argue, that secular public space is not a generalized but a structured absence . . . This invisible structure of secular space (and time) means that cultural-religious practices are rendered differentially visible when put into coexistence with it. (2010, p. 881).

Al-Saji specifically mentions the shortened school day on Wednesday, originally enacted in order to accommodate catechism classes; but there are many other examples that are evident, such as the celebration of Christian holidays as ‘public’ holidays. It is in this context that other (read: non-Christian) religious signs become more visible. But what engendered the veil from being seen as problematic in some instances, for example in the case of perceived religious or political proselytizing, to problematic in all instances, argues Al-Saji, were two apriorisms operating in tandem: “the inscription of gender oppression as an essential feature of the representation of the Muslim veil” and the “presumed gender equality of French society (seen as continuous with and even an outcome of secularism)” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 882). In this way veiled Muslim women “provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected*” (Al Saji, 2010, p. 877; emphasis in the original).

Although religion is recognised and funded by the Flemish/Belgian state and Christianity is a more visible part of the nation’s fabric (through, for example, schools, hospitals, associations, et cetera) thus taking on a distinct form of secularism in relation to its French neighbour,⁷ there are some significant commonalities. The same form of cultural racism and exclusion—the structural results of which are strikingly similar—continues to manifest itself in various forms. It is evident in the Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) cultural tradition that continues largely unabated. It is evident in workplace discrimination towards women who wear headscarves and (brown) men who wear beards.⁸ It is evident in media

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Lieven Boeve, the head of the Catholic network of schools in Flanders, has actively campaigned for the headscarf to be permitted across all school networks, so there may be considerable diversity between Catholic schools, in terms of what is allowed.

⁶ In Flanders/Belgium religious denominations (including non-confessional worldviews) officially recognised by the state are eligible for funding. Currently Belgium recognises the following religions: Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Judaism, Islam and secular humanism. Adherents of these religions reserve the right to have confessional classes in public schools.

⁷ Church-state relations in Belgium (and the Netherlands) have been characterised by their (shared) history of pillarization in which society is segmented along religious and political lines. (See Bracke, 2011, for a concise but detailed explanation of pillarization.)

⁸ Recently, I was prevented from entering my university building unencumbered. A (white) woman, who was searching for her staff card, had blocked the side entrance by placing her umbrella and backpack on the ground. I needed to use the side door as well—instead of the revolving door—as I had my backpack and my daughter’s pram with me, having just dropped her off at school, but thought it impolite to try and pass her. I waited. The woman found her staff card and scanned herself in. I entered behind her. (The building was not locked and I need not have scanned my card, but only push the designated button for entry.) As soon as I entered

portrayals of the ‘other’. But primarily, it is manifested through the ever-present white gaze. This gaze does not permit Muslim women to be seen outside of a religious context.⁹

Radical bodies: Interpellation

At the other Flemish school in which I conducted my research, an intense discussion—precipitated by a reflection on the state of the world—broke out in class, after a student had remarked that Europe only attacked those who provoked them. Another student seemed to make no distinction between ISIS and Muslims and the teacher stopped the conversation to make clear that there was in fact a distinction. It was evident, however, that many of the students did not see the distinction. The same student brought up the Qur’an saying it sanctioned violence, but the teacher said that the Bible could also be interpreted from a violent perspective and that she had seen a programme about Russian Orthodox Christians and some of the Biblical texts they used were alarming.

Later that day, on the way back from an outdoor sport activity, another student asked me what religion I followed. I said that I was Muslim, but that I was no supporter of ISIS—I had felt that I needed to make that clear because of the preceding discussion in class—and she responded by saying “Oh, so you’re Muslim, but not very religious.” I said that I considered myself to be religious but I chose not to interpret the Qur’an from a violent perspective. I then went on to explain that many religious texts were open to violent interpretation but that people had to not choose violence. She nodded but did not seem convinced.

The classroom discussion referred to above took place in an environment in which issues pertaining to race and (European) colonial history were met with a general silence, both in the curriculum and within the classroom itself. The students therefore could not situate this discussion within a broader context even though the teacher attempted to bring nuance to the discussion. Because of the dominant (racialized) narrative about Muslims in Europe, Islam was equated with ISIS. In her 2011 article, *Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands*, Sarah Bracke draws on Althusser’s theory of interpellation, which is concerned with how a “subject comes into being through an initial submission to power” (Bracke, 2011, p. 37) in order to study subject formation in Muslim women. Bracke is concerned, in particular, with how Muslim women who, mired in invective discourses concerning themselves and Islam in general, fundamentally respond as a “subject whose constituency and agency is already informed by the terms in which she is addressed” (Bracke, 2011, p. 29). As far as the student was concerned, religious Muslims were complicit with terrorism. I was therefore either a practicing Muslim and therefore ‘radical’, or a non-practicing and therefore nominal Muslim. I was confined between these two narratives that were imposed on me, and in responding to the student, I felt compelled to disassociate myself from the ‘radical’ Muslim narrative. In doing so, I articulated my sense of self in direct relation to the dominant narrative about Muslims, solidifying in me the double-consciousness first identified by Du Bois:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self 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,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (1903/2008, p. 2)

It is a strange thing, this double-consciousness, this internal panopticon. Even as we resist it, it continues to inform the ways in which we project ourselves to the (white) world.

she asked me whether I worked there. I said yes and attempted to move past her. She then stepped in front of me and said: “But do you work here?” I told her that I did not have to explain myself to her and that I did work there. Then I walked away. She then said okay and moved away. It was not clear to me whether she was Flemish or not but I felt that the racial climate in Flanders emboldened her to act in the way she did. The cultivated field of vision prevented her from being able to consider that a woman in *hijab*, with a pram in tow, could be a fellow employee of *her* university.

⁹ In July of this year, Ihsane Haouach, a highly qualified Muslim Belgian of Moroccan descent wearing a headscarf, resigned as a government commissioner at the Institute for Equality of Women and Men. Her role as commissioner was short-lived as she was subject to personal attacks and cyber bullying almost as soon as her appointment was made public. But this kind of harassment did not only happen at a distance. During her first board meeting of directors, Corentin de Salle, a representative of the liberal political party, MR, demanded that she remove her headscarf for all future meetings (see Flour, 2021).

Masks Familiar: Responding to the White Gaze

In his 2017 path-breaking book *Radical Skin, Moderate Masks*, Yassir Morsi explores the way in which the white gaze hampers Muslim subjectivity. Morsi poignantly highlights the way in which Muslims construct themselves within the confines of the white gaze. Paying homage to Frantz Fanon, Morsi's book captures the fundamental 'fantasy' that people of colour constantly reside in through the white gaze and their attempts to grapple with it.

Morsi skilfully employs Nietzsche's concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian and argues: "I use the Apollonian to mean the aesthetics of conversation that conceals colonialism's bloodied past. It comes from overlooking the concrete, Dionysian conditions of the Other's coloured bodies and the forgotten affects of such" (Morsi, 2017, p. 5). The skin Muslims are in is already considered 'radical' because of European habits of seeing (Morsi, 2017; see Al-Saji, 2010). Muslims thus become the negative foil in which Europeans are reflected and are thus compelled to prove themselves otherwise (Morsi, 2017).

Morsi identifies three masks which Muslims adorn in response to the white gaze: fabulous; militant and triumphant. The *fabulous mask* symbolises our need to prove our 'normalness' to the West, to show how alike we are. We tacitly accept the "culture talk on the War on Terror and wage a culture war against the terrorists" and in so doing ratify the binaries of the 'good' and 'bad' Muslim (Morsi, 2017, p. 87). This is an attempt to transform, as Morsi argues, "Dionysian Otherness to an illuminating Apollonian humanism" (Morsi, 2017, p. 51). This "performance" of our humanity, however, necessitates an act of forgetting in which the evils of colonialism and its enduring legacy are not factored into the consideration of our current condition (Morsi, 2017, p. 51). The *militant mask* symbolises our acceptance of the 'radicalisation' discourse and our identification of the problems we are facing as located within Islam itself, something we must strive against. We mourn the loss of an 'authentic' Islam, our deviation from which has led us to our beleaguered condition. The political is excised. We are at pains to show that we inhabit the 'good' Muslim and that we are against the 'radical' and therefore bad Muslim. The *triumphant mask* is ostensibly the most damaging mask of all; it is the mask in which the white gaze has completely consumed us. Colonialism is only superficially acknowledged and there is a "transference here of guilt ... colonialism becomes an evil that Islamists use" (Morsi, 2017, p. 103). The West is seen as a utopia, as the final political destination.

I saw myself in all of the 'moderate masks' identified by Morsi, at various stages of my life, but the conversation I had with the student, was a poignant example of my acceptance of the radicalisation discourse and my donning of the militant mask, in my effort to put distance between myself and the 'bad', 'radical' Muslim. In so doing I also donned my fabulous mask. And even now, these masks are implicated in my daily existence, in my "daily diminishment," to borrow a phrase from poet, essayist and playwright, Claudia Rankine (2014, p. 32). Because of the way in which Muslims have been interpellated, we have to measure our words, measure our actions at every turn, and it is in a word, exhausting. When one forgets oneself, the repercussions can be too much to bear. One need only think of the case of Rachida Lamrabet, a Moroccan-born Belgian lawyer and writer working for Unia, an inter-federal equal opportunity and anti-discrimination centre. In 2017 Lamrabet did a creative piece on the burka, a short film titled *Project Deburkanisation* (commissioned by the Goethe-Institut Washington and KVS, the Brussels national theatre) in her personal capacity as an artist.

The film, although short, cuts to the quick. It does not spare the (Western) viewer nor the lawmakers it addresses. In the opening scene of the film we see various people, of different social and ethnic backgrounds, which make up the public space. Already we are made to bear witness that the public space is not neutral and social inequality is a stark reality (De Mul, 2017). We then move to a Muslim woman who is veiled and is typing behind a computer screen. She is the one making judgments. She chastises European lawmakers for daring to place themselves on an equal footing with God. For wanting to know and wanting to see everything, the omniscient narrators of a story they are attempting to refashion. She shows contempt and disdain for their voyeurism. She warns (the viewer) that control of the Muslim woman's body is only the entry point to much larger intrusions on the freedoms of all. She ends by repeating the words "Liberty, equality, security", a play on France's national motto, "Liberty, equality, fraternity," manifesting not only the contradictions evident between rhetoric and action but also the name in which these violations take place. Moreover, the fact that she replaces "fraternity" with "security" seems to suggest that there can be no brotherhood for those considered 'other'.

In an interview with Knack, a Belgian newspaper, she dared to suggest (as she had done with her film) that Muslim women be taken as subjects in the burka debate and that the ban on the burka was racist and a contravention of human

rights. She was fired shortly after. Her book “*Zwijg, Allochtoon!*” (Shut up, immigrant!) in which she reflects upon these events and very eloquently undoes the Apollonian, is also, like Morsi’s work, a treatise on whether the Muslim can speak (freely). The answer is: not without consequence. It was impossible for her film to only be seen as a creative work intended to stimulate debate because of a particular field of vision (see Al-Saji, 2010), which immediately reads her body as ‘radical’ (see Morsi, 2017; see also Lamrabet, 2017 and Soumahoro, 2020).

The book, ironically, has received much praise and Lamrabet is now celebrated with literary awards. But it’s difficult to ascertain whether she is being celebrated as a writer in her own right, or as an ‘allochtoon’¹⁰ writer. In a keynote address given at the 2013 Edinburgh World Writers’ Conference held in Brussels, she had the following to say:

Regardless of the fact that I write in Dutch, my writing is not considered to meet the norm that has been set out by the centre. I write about identity, about migration and a changing super diverse world. That is the kind of world we live in today here in this country, and yet, some readers and critics are convinced that my literature has nothing to do with them; it is the literature of the others, as opposed to national literature. I write about Antwerp and readers would talk to me about my work as if I had described a world far away from them. My characters are strange exotic individuals for the mere fact that their names are Younes, Mariam and Marwan and not Isabel, Jan or Peter. (Lamrabet, 2013, para. 12)

The fact of Lamrabet’s persecution and then praise seems suggestive of an internal struggle within Flemish society: the inclination to protect its hard won national identity at all costs and the desire to exhibit its Apollonian ideals. People of colour become the casualties of this struggle. To return to the example I used in the preceding section, I was welcomed into the school by the principal who seemed confident that the Apollonian ideals of the school would allow for my presence to go unremarked upon, but in the end my (Dionysian) ‘difference’ and the inverted position in which this ‘difference’ took form, proved to be too much. Furthermore, my interpellation through Islamophobic discourse buttressed by the white gaze, compelled me to (unwittingly) accept its terms, by considering myself from the vantage point of this discourse.

Conclusion

Using Nirmal Puwar’s figure of the space invader, I have attempted to show the way in which the body of the anthropologist has implications for her research. While the body of the white anthropologist secures scientific objectivity, the body of the anthropologist of colour, in turn, carries with it many projected meanings related to the ‘unscientific’. I have hoped to show, however, the illusory nature of the ‘objectivity’ related to whiteness and that all bodies carry with them their experiences of being in the world, in those particular bodies. As a South African Muslim, veiled researcher, I did not make sense in the Flemish school context. I was not a white (fe)male. Moreover, I was African but not black, Muslim and veiled, but not Moroccan or Turkish. I spoke English and was highly educated. This ‘confusion’ only seemed to exacerbate the suspicion and contempt often accruing to Muslims in Flanders. Through processes of (in)visibilisation, reprimanding, compartmentalisation and interpellation, my veiled body was overwhelmingly treated as a religious body which engulfed other aspects of my identity such as ‘researcher’. I wore my moderate mask(s) in an attempt to navigate the spaces in which my body was construed as out of place, but I remained trapped within particular racialized habits of seeing. As for all those characterised as ‘other’ these habits of seeing have ramifications in terms of what can be said of my experience, the way in which it can be said, and the way in which it will be read.

How can researchers of colour overcome these difficult challenges? I’m not sure there are any one-size-fits-all solutions. I’m equally unsure about whether it is our job to stifle racialized habits of seeing: we should not have to be responsible for doing the work related to unmaking racism. Having said that, putting pen to paper can be a very effective mechanism for coping with the kinds of diminishment I have outlined in this article. Writing about our subjective experiences can act not only as a source of comfort to others in the academy and beyond, having similar experiences, but can act as a form of self-care. Through writing, we are able to distill our subjective experience, and identify particular modalities that are reflective of what is happening in broader society, thereby making sense of our reality. Finding the language to express ourselves, without a concern for *savoir faire*, acts as both a creative outlet and source of strength, that helps to maintain our mental health. By daring to pick up our pens and document our experiences, we might also dare to face the world, without reaching for our masks.

¹⁰ This is a controversial term used in Belgium (especially Flanders) and the Netherlands to denote an immigrant background. (See Geschiere, 2009, for a more detailed explanation.)

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