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published in

Transforming Bodies and Religions
2021

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.4324/9780367808754-10](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367808754-10)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

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citation for published version (APA)

Mustafa, N., & Westerduin, M. (2021). Exploring new vocabularies in conversations about religion, race, politics, and justice. In M. van den Berg, L. Schrijvers, J. Wiering, & A-M. Korte (Eds.), *Transforming Bodies and Religions: Powers and Agencies in Europe* (pp. 135-154). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367808754-10>

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7 Exploring new vocabularies in conversations about religion, race, politics, and justice

Nawal Mustafa and Matthea Westerduin

Knowledge-making, race, religion, and politics

We, the authors, were raised in different households in terms of race, religion, socio-economic, cultural, and migration histories. What we did share, however, was a sense of alienation at the university in the way religion, critique, politics, and knowledge were engaged with. We were both brought up with an approach of religion (Nawal: Islam, Matthea: Christianity) that did not strictly separate between religion, politics, our personal experiences, critique, and knowledge-making. No fundamental distinctions were made between these different dimensions: religion could function as critique, the personal was political, and it was considered dangerous to detach knowledge-making from ethics. Obviously, this attitude was not always practised, because it coincided with other – sometimes opposing – practices and attitudes. Nonetheless, in our families and family histories, it was an important ideal: something to strive for.

We define these practices and learned attitudes as part of what others have termed ‘embodied knowledge’. Although knowledge-making is always embodied, ‘academic knowledge’ often does not reckon with the reality that we cannot separate ‘academic questions’ from the experiences and knowledges of the one articulating such questions. In this chapter we use the term ‘embodied knowledge’ to articulate our aim of explicitly engaging with those epistemologies, experiences, and attitudes that are often not accepted as ‘academic’ or ‘scholarly’: familial histories; individual experiences; affective, political, and cultural memories we carry in our bodies, fragmented as these memories might be. Memories of migration, of loss, displacement, in/exclusion, of being racialised and sexualised in this world. Memories of belonging to (non)-normative traditions, politics, cultures, religions, communities.

It is our argument that when we entered our studies (Nawal: Law, Matthea: History), our embodied knowledge was displaced, repressed, or unlearned. Throughout our academic training, detachment and disengagement were advocated over personal investment, ethical development, or political engagement. The first instruction during Matthea’s History study for example, was: “We can learn nothing from History. Historical

narratives that pretend we can, are the product of amateurism. They are not works of academic scholarship.” Historical narratives should not aim to intervene ethically or politically, the professor tried to say. Detachment was advocated over political engagement and dissociation over emotional involvement. Personal experiences were hardly ever engaged with as possible sources of knowledge-making. Although historians would never claim ‘neutrality’, the goal was to remain as neutral as possible: to stay out of the everyday mess of our experiences, politics, and ethics. There were exceptions to this approach, but this detached way of doing History was dominant.

Throughout our studies, race or whiteness were scarcely discussed as academically relevant. Neither did we engage with questions of who can legitimately produce knowledge in our disciplines and from which location. Which kinds of knowledges are delegitimised as biased, and which voices can (more) easily inhabit positions of ‘universality’, ‘neutrality’, or ‘impartiality’? Many scholars, critical of these asymmetric relations, have reflected on the interrelation between detached Westernised knowledge-making and domination. The process in which ‘neutral’ scholars attribute to themselves the power of definition: the capability of systematising, classifying, and categorising ‘Others’ along lines of race, gender, modernity, geography, sexuality, and class, while they remain out of scrutiny.¹ Such scholarship produces ‘objects’ of study who can never become ‘subjects’ and speak back on their own terms.

Black feminist/womanist and de/postcolonial intellectuals have analysed how this particular way of knowledge-making is key in (neo)colonial management and the preservation of white supremacy and patriarchy. This chapter is deeply indebted to insights, archives, and canons produced by these critical movements. They have built their own tradition of knowledge-making, of composing intellectual texts in a way that seeks to do justice to their insights: to articulate the impossibility of their own subjectivity, as Black and American: W.E.B. Du Bois; as Black and woman: Sojourner Truth; as Arab and Jew: Ella Shohat; as Muslim and scholar: Yassir Morsi; to do justice to the experiences of Others that have been silenced and express the impossibility to fully vocalise these silences: James Baldwin, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Imre Kertész, Ruth Klüger, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Malcom X, bell hooks, Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, Saidiya Hartman. In the Netherlands this kind of engaged intellectual work is practised by people like Anton de Kom, Gloria Wekker, Philomena Essed, and many others.

‘Embodied knowledge’, for us, also includes religion. Although (de)legitimation of knowledge is often scrutinised in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, we are also concerned with displacements of ‘embodied knowledge’ on the basis of a religion-secular divide. We understand this divide as producing borders between acceptable religion (‘religion’ that is separated from the ‘secular’) and unacceptable religion (‘religion’ that transgresses

these boundaries). This divide thus establishes boundaries between 'religion' and supposedly 'secular' phenomena, such as politics, economics, knowledge-making, and race. The problem we aim to tackle is the impossibility of academic engagements with archives and experiences that have been termed 'religion'. Even studies that have deconstructed 'the secular' hardly approach archives now labelled 'religion' as possible 'critique' or 'theory' to engage with normatively. This chapter therefore aims at thinking along, against, and within these archives.² Undoing a religious-secular divide also helps to take on board topics that are normally separated by this divide. Race-making (as something supposedly 'secular') is often disconnected from Christianity (as 'religion'). The chapter conversely engages with relationalities between Christian theology and race-making, between Muslimness and racism, Islam and blackness, Christianness and whiteness.

We are thus concerned with embodied knowledge that revokes religion-secular boundaries in different ways. On the one hand, we think together topics that are separated by this divide, such as Christian theology and race-making. And on the other, we include 'illegitimate' religion in our reflections – religion-as-critique, religion-as-knowledge, religion-as-political, types of religion that transgress boundaries that separate between the 'secular' (politics, critique, knowledge) and 'religion'. This approach results in concerns and questions that resonate differently in our individual reflections on Muslimness and Christianness, especially since the white Calvinist tradition Matthea was raised in is historically tied to the Westernised knowledge-making we aim to undo. Nawal, conversely, has been confronted with its flipside: an academic and public reality in which every aspect of Muslimness can be scrutinised and marked. We aim to undo this type of knowledge-making that exclusively renders 'Islam' the problem, instead of the conditions under which this asymmetric problem-making can emerge. To reverse this dynamic, the text pauses extensively on how 'Christian supersessionism' is implicated in the production of knowledge that fixates Others in a story-within-a-story and renders Others a 'problem' or 'question' that needs solving. Given this implication, questions of race, religion, and (in)justice affect us differently, so that our individual contributions are deliberately asymmetrical.

Instead of analysing processes of in- and exclusion, this chapter aims at doing knowledge-making differently. In other words, rather than critically analysing the normative patterns in what becomes accepted and unaccepted 'academic knowledge', we have tried to 'do scholarship differently'. Not only in combining topics that are normally separated, but also in terms of style, format, and setup. Our aim is to explore how to create a different academic vocabulary – a different style for conversations about religion, race, and politics – that can express the disorderliness of it, but also possibilities of transformation, doubt, and change. In that sense, the chapter is a performance of (our search for) an alternative vocabulary that does not follow straight lines, is dialogical, asymmetric, explorative, relational, and open-ended.

Developing a new vocabulary also entails trying to establish a different way of using and engaging with language. We consider language as an essential element in our venture of moving away from ‘detachment’. In our chapter we opt for a more affective usage of language. The text might feel ‘un-academic’ and may create discomfort. This affective language, however, enables us to precisely show that which is hidden, namely that there is a specific way of ‘doing academia’. Beyond the intersections of race, religion, class, and gender, there are formalities that require those entering academia to act, talk, and write in a certain manner. We did not follow these formalities, but rather approached this chapter as a messy undertaking, and disorganised. As disorganised as the religious traditions we carry with us: traditions, modes of thinking, and practices that strengthen, heal, disrupt, and humble us.

Many conversations preceded this article. We’ve had numerous conversations on the interrelations among religion, politics, race, and (views on) justice: how these connections affect us differently, (im)possibilities of moving away from the frames that hold us hostage (differently), and how we engage with the traditions we were raised in. We could not have these talks in the midst of academic spaces, impossible as it often is in academia to easily shift from theoretical reflections to personal experiences, from evolved arguments to thoughts that are half finished, feelings that cannot be fully grasped, or conflicted arguments we sought to plough through. Hence, our talks took place outside and in-between academic spaces: at the university during lunch and on coffee-breaks; in WhatsApp and phone conversations; during, after, and before activism or academic meetings; when we ate breakfast or watched TV. We found connection through mutual obsession with Netflix shows that triggered us or made us forget the world around us. If there is one word we can use to describe our ongoing conversation, it would be: unfinished. What we try to articulate and engage with in this chapter, then, may best be described as ‘embodied knowledge in transformation’.

Our chapter is slightly different from other written academic articles and chapters, as we are not trying to pose our arguments in three or four neat points that lead to a conclusion. Instead, we are invested in tracing, documenting, and solidifying our genealogies of knowledge through transgressive and reflective conversations. In this we aim to follow Saidiya Hartman’s method of ‘critical fabulation’, which entails the rearranging of basic elements of the narrative, i.e. conversation (Hartman 2008, 2019). The aim here is to unsettle the status of ‘the received and authorised account’ and in doing so create space for thinking with and about knowledge that might be perceived to fall outside the scope and limit of academia. Thus, in the different parts of this contribution, we move sometimes rapidly through different elements of our conversations. We also engage with eclectic sources, the way we did throughout our conversations, easily moving between quotes from books we hold dear, to personal experiences, academic expertise, religious practices and texts, or critique upon and from them.

In the first part we reflect on our displacement within academia but also on the consequences of living in and coming of age in a politically turbulent time where external differentiations based on race, gender, religion, class, and sexual orientations are juxtaposed. We reflect on how our experiences and struggles sometimes were so similar but at other times were completely different. In the second part of the chapter, we articulate how we engage with our religious traditions (differently) in the face of the experienced injustices as expressed in the first part. We struggle with balancing on the one hand the important values and insights we gain from engaging with our religious tradition and on the other hand over-romanticising and desensitising our religious traditions by silencing the harmful parts. How do we honour, critique, and engage without disregarding and/or over-simplifying parts of our religion(s)? How do we struggle with these questions (differently)? Is there a liminal space where we can be deeply religious and simultaneously acknowledge that religion can also be harmful? For now, we invite you to read our reflections with an open mind and we hope that the discomfort we feel will seep through the page and capture you wherever you are reading this.

Transgressive reflections and conversations

NAWAL

I want to explore the many ways I am compelled to be a good or bad Muslim. I have come to dislike the neatness of the good Muslim, in thinking and talking about Islam and racism. I am repetitive and disorganized. I dislike the right angles of angles of today's scholarship. I hate the performance of a balanced Islam. It is such a lie. The Muslim world is in turmoil and so am I. It is violent. It is regressive. It is burning and harmfully patriarchal and it is beautiful and everything in between. It is in a sense to me partly known and greatly unknown, and I must reject the therapeutic tones of a good Muslim who speaks to help ease (a very privileged) white anxiety and speaks of it through common sense and a flow of premises.

(Morsi 2017, 4–5)

One of the reoccurring themes in the discussion we have had over the past three years is the question of how we can re-politicise religion. When it comes to Islam, in current Western political and societal realities, this wish (or rather, fantasy) of repoliticising religion, i.e. Islam, in a different manner is complicated. Conversations about Islam and Muslims are mainly dominated by the idea that they are incompatible with 'our' ('the Western') way of living. Articulating a wish for re-politicisation can easily be seen as a threat because, generally, in the European psyche the archetypical model of Muslim subjectivity became synonymous with violence, aggression, death, and destruction, especially in the post-9/11 era. The quote by Morsi resonates with my experiences on a different level: it articulates my own experience of growing up as a Muslim in a rural area in the Netherlands, in

a world that feared and ostracised Islam. Wearing the Muslim headscarf (hijab) all of sudden was not only a religious practice, but also a tool of recognition, which lead people to believe that by wearing the hijab, one was an ambassador of the religion and as such could be interrogated and subjugated to harassment and violence.

So, as a child and a teenager I was forced to not only struggle with understanding what Islam meant to me on a spiritual level, but I also had to react to the external need for answers by those who were close to me, as well as complete strangers. Simultaneously, I was developing a sense of political understanding, and the need within me to rebel like many other teenagers. But in my case, it became apparent to me that because of the global war on terror, my options to experiment with these different parts of my identity were limited. I had to present myself, the Muslim, and my religion, Islam, as peacefully as I could. This meant that when responding to questions or insults about Islam, I had to watch my tone, my body language, and my message had to be palatable and rational. I had to speak the language of the 'Enlightenment' and present myself and my arguments as non-threatening as possible in order to be heard. Internally, I felt displaced, unheard, and conflicted. I had hoped that by explaining basic religious concepts such as the Ramadan I would create more awareness, but I was wrong.

As I matured and entered the university, I decided to just get through the education system as fast as possible without too many obstacles, but I still remember some of the incidents that happened. I remember how one of my professors, during a 9 am class about world politics, asked for my opinion about the stoning of a woman who had allegedly committed adultery in a country in the Middle East or Africa. I remember thinking "why are you asking me for my opinion?", but not daring to utter those words. I remember acting the good Muslim by trying to explain a situation that I barely understood or knew anything of. I remember all of my fellow students looking at me for explanation as I attempted to give half-hearted answers. I remember walking away distraught but not really knowing why. This incident has always stayed with me, and it was years later that I was able to recognise how I was being 'othered' and held responsible for things that did not have anything to do with me. As soon as I recognised this, I began to look around and examine the initiatives of Muslim activists or listen tentatively when Muslims appeared on Dutch National TV. Over and over I began to see that one archetype of 'the Muslim', namely 'the good Muslim', was promoted by Muslims and invoked and accepted by non-Muslims. This figure was then bided against that of 'the bad Muslim', the one that refuses to shake hands with the opposite sex, the one that points to the hypocrisy of Western countries in their arguably illegal wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, or the one that dares to wear the Niqab.

I came across initiatives from people who identify as Muslim, such as '#NotInMyName', an online campaign created by Western Muslims in order to condemn terrorism. These kinds of campaigns try to salvage the

seemingly unsalvageable image of Islam and the Muslim. By being the ‘good Muslim’, they ineffectively tried to distance themselves, but they mainly managed to contribute to the creation of an ‘other’, a ‘barbaric’.

When it came to political participation or critiquing foreign policies of countries such as the Netherlands, the lack of power of good Muslims became painfully visible. I have played the role of the good Muslim and the bad Muslim, never feeling at home in any of those roles because of their rigidity. I have felt suffocated by both of those roles. I was reactionary and I wanted to retaliate by being unapologetic, meanwhile losing myself somewhere along the line. When I was performing my good Muslim act, my explanation for why I, for instance, wore the hijab was articulated through individualistic neo-liberal logics. I lied to myself and others by saying I wore it because it was my choice. Yes, there certainly is a choice element to partaking or performing religious rituals, but where was God in all of this? And isn’t fasting in the month of the Ramadan first and foremost a religious practice ordained by Allah? Regardless of the choice element, I wondered, would I choose to wear the hijab if I didn’t consider it to be a command from God? I felt like I had overstressed the choice element and downplayed the God element in order to be relatable. And I missed the communal element as I saw the individual approach become increasingly favoured. I came to detest the ‘neat’ superficial options that I seem to have as a Muslim.

There are no bad or good Muslims. I developed my identity in and through a globally politically turbulent period where my religion was at centre stage. I learned to understand that complexities and messiness are at the heart of constructing one’s identity. I no longer feel the need to clean up “the mess that is created by my religion”, to echo the sentiment of a commentator at a panel discussion I participated in. I am learning to be comfortable in feeling uncomfortable. In doing so, I found hope in the Quran and Hadith, I despaired at the state of so-called Muslim countries, and I felt lost in my own home. I struggle and I will continue to struggle with my religion, how I relate to my religion, how my religion inspires and informs my politics and activism, and how it forms and transforms me. And as I struggle, I will carry the words of the rapper J. Cole: “There is beauty in the struggle, ugliness in the success ” with me.

[MATTHEA]

I hate the performance of a balanced Islam. It is such a lie. The Muslim world is in turmoil and so am I. It is violent. It is regressive. It is burning and harmfully patriarchal and it is beautiful and everything in between. It is in a sense to me partly known and greatly unknown, and I must reject the therapeutic tones of a good Muslim who speaks to help ease (a very privileged) white anxiety and speaks of it through common sense and a flow of premises.

(Morsi 2017, 4–5)

“I hate the performance of an innocent white Christianity.” This sentence circled in my mind after reading Morsi. Nawal, you write about how Muslims have been fixated into roles of the good (and bad) Muslim. How it feels to be watched, screened, and evaluated – even, or should I say particularly, by teachers in university classrooms. This continuous demand to perform a comforting and neat Muslimness, that diminishes your liberties to experiment, to harshly criticise, be irrational at times, aggressive, or messy, to have secrets, strong beliefs, or regrets. These past few years I have been wondering about the flipside of this screening gaze: the side I have been residing in, a side that is white, secular, and Christian. Thinking of how this ‘gaze’ not only fixates others into dehumanising roles but also produces a false sense of self. A self that has ascribed to itself the power to evaluate, judge, and analyse Others, without returning this favour, without acknowledging its own dependency and limitations. Holding onto fictions of innocence, autonomy, and rationality. A self that judges harshly, while the ‘self’ always gets the benefit of the doubt, based on extenuating circumstances, reality’s ‘complexities’. Is it not? In a twisted way, this sense of self diminishes our personhood too, be it asymmetrically. Of course, whiteness comes with power, comfort, privileges, and safety nets, but it also preserves a sense of self that is ‘delusional’ (Glen Helberg): an over-inflated ego, at once too big to carry and also falsely innocent. Any harsh reminder that implicates this self in a world that is ‘violent’, ‘burning’, and ‘harmfully patriarchal’ is diffused and hushed under comforting blankets of ‘nuance’, ‘distance’, ‘neutrality’, or ‘good intentions’. The gazing self might be in power, but its sense of control is false: it is fragile and small, continuously in need of comfort; not fully matured, like a child, as James Baldwin suggests in one of his essays. But maybe children are better capable of owning their fears, owning the pain they inflict on the playground.

“I hate the performance of an innocent white Christianity.” It is a performance I know all too well. I have lived its comforts and complacencies. And I have to say, it is rather easy to maintain. For a long time I thought of myself as part of a minority: a religious minority living in a secular country. Not without reason, I have to add. Some of the things you write Nawal, I recognise well enough. When I grew up, I also felt judged and looked down upon: because I was ‘brainwashed’: because I did not reflect secularity’s self-image – too religious, too orthodox – because I wore different clothes. I practised Christianity too ‘rigidly’. When I enrolled in acting classes, a very secular and ‘progressive’ space, I was screened, questioned, and judged, while others could inhabit this ‘neutral’ space without any interrogation. My habits, worldview, dress, ethics, and practices were marked, while their particular habits, morals, and beliefs were not up for discussion. I remember a heated debate with a friend who fiercely opposed religious education. “Children should learn to choose for themselves”, he said. Religious education ‘brainwashed’ children. I remember being frustrated, because he could not see his own preferences as particular and biased. As if

there is neutral ground from which to educate children. I tried to articulate this inequality, but it did not come across. I remember my anger and discomfort. Others could ask me the most intimate of questions – about my hopes and fears, life and death, about my family and upbringing, about my daily practices and rituals – while they remained safely out of the conversation. They were neutral, rational, objective – at least, more than I was. I had to prove my ability to think critically, while they self-evidently possessed this quality. These experiences may resemble some of yours, Nawal, but they are also very far removed from yours. I never thought of myself as white and middle class, was never forced to do so. I never thought of the relation between wealth, whiteness, and Christianness. Colonialism for me was a far-away historical episode, not something that continues to influence lived realities today. I did not have to wonder whether I ‘belonged’ to this country or had to prove my ‘worthiness’, integration, or assimilation. I had no idea of how suffocating this country was for teenagers who were refugee, Black, Muslim.

“I have come to hate the performance of an innocent white Christianity. It is such a lie.” The past few years I have difficulty in church when we pray for the sufferings ‘over there’: human rights violations ‘over there’, tragic wars and conflicts ‘over there’. As if ‘over there’ has nothing to do with us, with ‘over here’. As if our worlds are not intricately interwoven. As if ‘we’ haven’t been ‘over there’ for the past few centuries. As if ‘we’ are innocent bystanders, simply caring for the poor, for refugees, for people in need, holding on to Christian faith, hope, and love, in a pool of despair. “God, please, deliver us from evil.” These prayers seem harmless, unrelated to political conflicts and wars, as if Christian theology is apolitical. This innocence and neutrality however, is harmful: it erases the continued importance of colonial histories and racisms today. The performance of an ‘innocent white Christianity’ is, I think, the very flipside of Morsi’s ‘balanced Islam’. It displaces the losses, anger, and traumas produced by (Christian and secular) racisms and neo-colonialism, deflecting any real engagement with these repressed injustices. How to disrupt this harmful gaze? For you, Nawal, this is a different question and different struggle than it is for me. We are both forced into parts we do not want to play, albeit with painfully different outcomes and consequences. When we shared our thoughts, our work, our histories, our jokes, our television obsessions the past few years, it felt, at times, like we could step outside of these restricting roles – broaden our playing field, so we could think anew, change, relate and act differently than before, have some moments of relief. Until we entered spaces that were beyond our influence, where lines were being drawn again. Lines that fixate us, unequally, limiting your space much more than mine.

I hold on to your J. Cole: “There is beauty in the struggle.” Even though our struggles differ. One story that has helped me in struggling with my tradition is that of Hagar. Not the well-known biblical Hagar from Genesis, but a forgotten Hagar from the New Testament. She helps me to unthink

academic neutral grounds and white Christian innocence that have never been there in the first place.

Thinking along, against, and within ‘our’ religious traditions

[MATTHEA]When I grew up, biblical figures were like close neighbours to me, living across the street. Their clothes might have been ancient, but their presence was as real to me as the existence of my aunts and uncles, or the beads on my bicycle. Sarah, Abraham, and Moses were part of our everyday life. School days started with a biblical story, and after each meal we read from the bible in turns: about kings with five-syllable names, prophetic fires of Elijah and Elisha (‘finally a woman-prophet’, I thought, not knowing Elisha was a male name), and about many daughters, wives, and strangers, who somehow intervened but were left unnamed. These were not sweet bedtime stories or exciting fairy tales from which we could easily detach. Much was at stake in the world of Daniel, Jeremiah, Job, Esther, and Ruth (justice, wrath, sin), and their world was made into ours. I vouched for them, with them, and against them; they angered and stunned me, incomprehensible as their actions sometimes were. The Bible seeped into our everyday lives, our everyday talks. Jeremy Jennings describes this as ‘reading the world scripturally’ (Jennings 2010). Although he was born into a Black pious Christian family in the US – his concerns very different from mine – I found something deeply recognisable in the way he writes about his parents: ‘I was never able to separate biblical hopes’, he says, ‘from their real hopes. They knew the Bible, but, far more important, they knew the world through the Bible’ (Jennings 2010, 2). Jesus and the prophets were not simple abstractions; they actively participated in our lives, for good and bad.

I may be critical of this pious Calvinist tradition today, and it often angers me, but thinking myself outside of it would be as nonsensical as thinking myself outside of my own body. It has constituted my sense of the world, its messiness and incomprehensibility, its beauty and possible futures. Sometimes I wish I had been raised more light-heartedly, but I am also happy that detachment and cynicism could never grow on me, nor could Disney World versions of the world. The tradition I was raised in provided a space for me where rough edges were not erased, soothed, or vanilla-fied, similar to the biblical stories that lack neat endings. Although adults tried to fixate Bible stories with moral lessons, or closed-off theologies, there was no systemic logic in them, no final meaning. The people in the text, including its many writers, were grappling with what they found in front of them, without ever fully grasping the world, each other, or God; without knowing how their actions would turn out. And although many images of God limited the life of a girl living in this male-centred world, making her smaller, there was also this open-endedness between God and the world, between God and me; an indeterminate space from which these images could be cracked open.

A few years ago, I started talking about race and Christianity in public, about the backstories of my tradition. I interrogated the close ties between white supremacy and liberal, progressive, and conservative Christian theology. Some people accused me of selling out, betraying my tradition, and ‘my people’: “Christians are already frowned upon by secular society, why increase this critique? Why airing the dirty laundry?” All the while forgetting that many white Christian and ‘secular’ people in the Netherlands share their privileged lives, views, and attitudes in this world. But my critique did not follow from a secular or ‘neutral’ (whatever that may be) stance. I did not detach myself from my tradition. On the contrary, my concern followed from a commitment to that tradition that I found at once beautiful and deeply problematic. A tradition that had taught me to not evade discomfort and human failure. My religious upbringing helped me to not look away from painful truths and things we would rather forget or repress, and take seriously today’s ‘Black prophetic fire’ (West 2014). Voices, like yours Nawal, that are not easily digestible and lay bare uncomfortable realities as they resist to play the grateful ‘*allochtoon*’ or ‘Muslim’ and claim justice on their own terms. Confrontations with these backstories are not easy or straightforward. For me they were disorienting and painful, as they expose an ugliness of the lifeworlds that I cherished and loved – an ugliness you were confronted with long ago, and I was shielded from by white, middle class, and Christian privileges.

“Tradition always spills over”, Josias Tempo said some time ago. I think he is right. Tradition cannot be contained or controlled. It spills over to unforeseen places, retrieving repressed and hidden memories. One such repressed memory for me is that of Hagar. Not the story of the two wives of Abraham as it was taught at school: Sarah as matriarch of Judaism, Hagar of Islam, always in competition. But rather Hagar as the backstory of a particular Christianity: the Oriental ‘slave woman’ against which the West could envision itself as self-critical and liberating. Free, like Sarah. Hagar as a story-within-a-story.

In the New Testament letter to the Galatians, Paul retells the Genesis story of Hagar as an allegory. He introduces Hagar and Sarah as the personification of two covenants between God and man: the one is a covenant of the law and slavery (Hagar), while the other is of promise and freedom (Sarah):

Tell me, you who wish to be under the law, have you been listening to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the slave woman’s son was born according to the flesh, while the free woman’s son was born through promise. These things are an allegory, for these women are two covenants. Hagar represents Mount Sinai [where Moses received the law] in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.
(Gal 4: 22–26)

While the offspring of the 'slave woman' Hagar was born 'according to the flesh', Sarah's son was born 'through promise'. Consequently, Sarah, the free woman, personifies the true covenant, that of freedom and promise, unbound to the logic 'of the flesh', while Hagar represents the Mosaic Law given on Mount Sinai. Although Paul was an observing Jew, his letters have been read as diametrically opposing 'Judaism'. In such readings, Sarah and Hagar were interpreted as the personification of 'Christianity' and 'Judaism' respectively, the former leading to freedom, the latter to slavery and despair.

Some time ago this Hagar wouldn't have made any sense to me. I never thought of Sarah as Christian. Nor would I think of Hagar as Jewish, negatively reflecting a Christian Sarah. These associations would baffle and probably annoy me. I was well aware of the anti-Judaic history of Christianity. The Hagar I knew was from Genesis: the foreign slave woman who was neither backward or inferior. God followed her into the desert, where an angel promised her descendants too many to count and a son who would be free. I did not know Hagar played a very different role in the New Testament, and neither did I know that even my Genesis Hagar had nothing to do with Judaism or Islam. She was shaped by Christian theology, not the Talmud or Hadiths. She was a Hagar seen through Christian eyes. Attempts to interpret Genesis as a Jewish text would not undo this. It would simply ignore the reality of a self-acclaimed Christian scriptural control, centring Christian concerns, instead of Jewish or Islamic ones. Reading Genesis as a Jewish text, I see now, simply sidesteps a long history in which 'Judaism' or 'reading Jewish' has been aligned to reading the Bible wrongly.

The Jewish Hagar of Paul uncomfortably reminds of Christianity's self-acclaimed supersession of Judaism. Or better, of how important 'Judaism' was in Christian interpretations of scripture. Jews, so the argument was, did not understand scripture's 'true meaning'. When Jews read Moses' law, so it was said, 'a veil is over their eyes': they are 'blinded' for God's truth. Christians, on the other hand, could see beyond the surface of the text, grasping its deeper meaning, through Christ. Hence, like Hagar, Jews were said to be enslaved by literalism and the flesh, while Christians were free like Sarah, through the spirit. These oppositions between Hagar (letter) and Sarah (spirit) were not minor details of early Christian theology, but crucial tropes to think with. 'Judaism' or 'reading Jewish' was shorthand for having the wrong orientation toward texts: the body, gender, sexuality, law, the world, and God. 'Judaism', in other words, functioned as a mirror image to construct different ideals of Christianness. Sometimes it was outright rejected and considered evil, and at other times it was evaluated more positively. But like Hagar, 'Judaism' always functioned as a story-within-a-story, superseded by a Christian present (Fredriksen 2010).

To some extent I knew about this supersessionist hermeneutic, but I was never aware of how far-reaching its violent afterlives have been; how central this hermeneutic of a story-within-a-story was in European colonial and racial classifications. In the Middle Ages, Islam was interpreted in terms

of supersession as well: it was considered either a return to Jewish law or a lapse into a pagan past. During this time, Hagar came to personify Islam alongside Judaism. This Oriental Hagar negatively (and sometimes positively) mirrored a newly constructed Occident: the Christian West (Akbari 2012). This invented 'West' rested on multiple secessions: not only Christianity's supersession of Judaism but also Christianity's supersession of Islam, white's supersession of black, modernity's supersession of tradition, Protestantism's supersession of Catholicism, secularism's supersession of (inappropriate) religion.³

The centre of this 'West' has never been stable or fixed, and down the line, Christianity too, has been superseded. I felt out of place too, growing up piously Christian in the Netherlands. I remember the look in the eyes of 'secular' adults when they spoke to me: a look of pity, as if I could not think for myself, as if my critical abilities had been silenced by my upbringing. But I was not Other to the 'West', not in terms of whiteness: my citizenship was never contested, nor were my rights to be where I was. And I was hardly aware of the superseded Others that I could easily judge or analyse, who were a story-within-my-story. People whose ancestors were colonised, displaced, or violated, while their resistance was silenced.

'Europe' may be divided along lines of north-south, east-west, civilised-backward, developed-poor; so were its racialised Others. The supersessionist 'West' distinguished and continues to distinguish between a good and bad Orient, between Western and Arab Jews, between progressive and backward Islam, or assimilable and unassimilable Muslims. In other words, there have been many Hagars and many Sarahs: free Sarahs; Sarahs who have become corrupted or underdeveloped; assimilated Hagars close to whiteness; or backward Hagars closer to blackness and slavery. What remains the same, however, is an underlying hermeneutic of domination and control. Based on the idea that particularised Others supposedly cannot grasp their own nature, histories, languages, and cultures: blinded as they are for their true and deeper meanings (Jennings 2010). This hermeneutic of control fixates Others into a story-within-a-story. Their lives are set out by an omniscient narrator, who screens, evaluates, judges, and analyses them, yet remains invisible. His particular concerns are masked as 'neutral', 'universal', or 'academic'. A narrator, who can see through superseded Others – through the Sarahs, Hagars, and their offspring – to grasp the true meaning of their worship and ways of life. He classifies them, studies them. Detached. Critical. Neutral. At least, more neutral than they are. After all, this knowing I is beyond race or gender. Free. Like Sarah's son.⁴

This supersessionist hermeneutic might seem like an obscure theological legacy. Its outcomes, however, are as real today as they were in colonial times. In *Radical Skin, Moderate Masks*, Yassir Morsi describes how racism exiles people from themselves. How the "white gaze possesses a will to dominate, own, distance or erase" (2017, 11). Racism fixates the Other,

Morsi says, in a story-within-a-story. The Other can only speak through the master narrative from the outside in, losing her/his own voice.

It is like some same omniscient narrator sets the scene for my story-telling. It calls me forward to tell a story about being Muslim. It first highlights the figure of the Muslim as a way to hail us into speaking in its language impregnated by a meaning that is ‘not inside ourselves, but outside’. It sets the themes and expectations, gives us the vocabulary and from that moment we become.

(Morsi 2017, 37–38)

For Morsi, this master narrative is ‘the War on Terror’ and ‘de-radicalisation’: a narrative inscribed unto Muslim bodies in many different ways, separating ‘saved’ from ‘oppressed’ women, moderate from radical Muslims, acceptable from unacceptable religion, dangerous from peaceful Islam. This screening, moreover, is not only set out via surveillance in airports, or on the streets, but also in supposedly self-critical spaces like academia, where Muslims can never fully inhabit the role of ‘neutral scholar’.

Despite popular views, Islamophobia is not simply about negative stereotyping, Morsi writes. It “is a productive discourse that defines the Muslim in convenient ways. In doing so, it impoverishes the ability of Muslims themselves to elaborate on what it means to be Muslim” (Morsi 2017, 39, see also Sayyid 2014). Islamophobia, in this meaning, advocates a Muslimness that continuously eases white and secular anxieties. It exclusively tolerates a Muslimness that does not remind of uncomfortable truths of Western (histories of) imperialism, and represses the messy struggles against racism and inequalities. It silences those who question injustices of the status quo. I read the repressed Hagar story as a backstory of what Morsi describes as being stuck in revolving doors – of being fixated, managed, controlled, in a continuously shifting story-within-a-story. Having to ‘perform’ a neat Muslimness for an anxious white secular and, I would add, Christian gaze. A gaze that renders Islam the problem, instead of the one gazing, instead of this illusory attempt to control. A desire of domination that is particularly valent in anti-radicalisation research. Such research harmfully “shatters and makes fragments of its subject matter”, since “every aspect of the Muslim life is brought under the microscope of. . . [a] scientific ‘evidence-based’ approach” (Morsi 2017, 17). It silences the messy realities of Muslims and people perceived as ‘Muslim’, living in the West.

The Hagar who was once Jewish and Muslim may help to undo some of these silences. Although associations between Hagar and Islam still hold, the Jewish Hagar has been comfortably forgotten. This backstory Hagar, however, lays bare the presence of the silent ‘third party’ (Hochberg 2016): the omniscient narrator (Christian or secular) who constituted a Hagar as a story-within-a-story of an Oriental slave woman (Jewish and Muslim) as mirror image of the West. This Hagar is uncomfortably reminiscent of how deeply rooted a supersessionist hermeneutic of domination still is in our

everyday lives. How easy it is for white people like me (Christian or secular) to slide into the role of the innocent ‘third party’, to be the one gazing and analysing, with nothing but good intentions. Blameless somehow, and detached. Ignorant of what this gazing does.

But tradition always spills over. It not only summons repressed or forgotten pasts; even Hagar-as-backstory cannot be fully contained. If I reread Genesis with this backstory Hagar in mind, she becomes highly disruptive. Not because I can finally grasp a ‘true’ Hagar (authentically Jewish or Muslim), forgetting her Christian afterlives, but rather because she shifts the gaze to the violent outcomes of being a-story-within-a-story, spilling over to places the reader cannot control or predict. She talks back to me, displaces my false sense of self, and breaks open closed-off subjectivities.

In the Christian Bible, Hagar is the surplus woman. The genealogies of Jesus mention Sarah as matriarch of Israel. Hagar is not included in this lineage. From this perspective, Hagar’s presence is not of any use, but the Genesis text is almost resistant to excluding her: instead, the text cracks open the metanarrative. It pauses upon the story of Hagar, of whom we still know her name, unlike so many other women in the Bible. A name not once mentioned by Sarah and Abraham. They refer to her as “mine” and “yours”, “my slave can give you a child”. Yet, when Hagar flees into the desert and an angel speaks to her directly, he first mentions her name: “Hagar”, he says, “slave of Sarai, where do you come from and where do you go to?” The angel does not deny Hagar’s reality of being unfree, yet he does not define her by that reality. Neither does he fully solve this issue. He tells her to go back, but not without making a promise first: she is promised offspring as many as she can count, and a son who will be “a wild donkey of a man”, whose “hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him.” Is that a way to say her son will be free? Uncomfortably reminding of how much hostility anyone faces who breaks out of slavery? The ‘radical skin’ that Morsi writes about?

After this promise, the text states something peculiar:

She [Hagar] gave this name to God who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.

(Gen 16: 13)

The text suggests it was not an angel who followed Hagar into the desert, but God. More importantly, not only God saw Hagar, but Hagar also saw God. The supposedly blinded slave woman is actually the one truly seeing God. Hence, while Hagar has to be removed from the story, the text gives Hagar the centre stage. Biblical scholar Yvonne Sherwood states that by doing so, the text almost draws attention to the uncomfortable truth of her exclusion (2018). Although she will not belong to the ‘elected people’, she goes through all these significant events before they do. Hagar flees into the desert before Israel will do so. Almost starving, she is shown a well by God. She will birth Abraham’s first son, before Sarah does. And most

importantly, Hagar speaks with and names God, foreshadowing one of the most important stories of Exodus of Moses and the burning bush where God reveals his name: 'I am' (Sherwood 2018, 439–468). I have heard that story endless times, but not once was it coupled to that of Hagar, who had given God this intimate name before Moses did.

Eventually, Hagar and Ishmael will leave the centre stage. The text does not evade or hide this uncomfortable truth. Hagar is not some kind of feminist heroine, who is liberated from all oppressions. Both Sarah and Hagar are stuck in a patriarchal storyline, in which their lives are set out to be in competition: Sarah powerless over her own fertility, Hagar powerful as mother yet slave to Sarah, leaving Abraham the innocent third party. Both women are defined by their sons, and no daughter can carry their bloodline. The text states that God protects Ishmael when he grows up, but the offspring of Ishmael has no future in the Bible. Yet, reading the text with Hagar's Christian afterlives in mind is highly subversive: "You are the God who sees me, and I see You", Hagar says. The superseded 'blinded' Other is the one seeing. When I read these lines with the backstory Hagar in mind, I lose control over a text that I can no longer claim as 'mine' or 'ours'. 'We', who have claimed power of interpretation based on the supersession of Hagar, are forced to listen. Hagar, conversely, becomes the speaking, seeing, and interpreting subject. The story exposes that a supersessionist sense of self is violent, false, and illusionary; that it rests on an imaginary sense of control that denies mutual interdependency and vulnerability. By centring the Other, conversely, the text shows traces of more open-ended, life-affirming subjectivities. Grappling as Hagar does, with what she finds in front of her, leading us to unforeseen places. Like God in the desert.

[NAWAL]

But this cry – Allahu Akbar – terrorizes the vain, who see in it a project of decline. They are right to fear it, for its egalitarian potential is real: to put men, all men, back in their place, without any form of hierarchy. Only one entity is allowed to rule. God. No other entity is granted this power to exercise against one's peers or against God. Thus, white people take their place alongside all their brothers and sisters in humanity: the place of simple mortals. We might call this a utopia, and it is one. But to re-enchant the world will be a difficult task. There is no need to be a believer to interpret this philosophy from profane point of view. Fruitful or not, it's a wisdom that is completely 'rational' and can be supported by all.

(Bouteldja 2016, 133–134)

Growing up as a Muslim in a land foreign and yet so intimately known to me has always forced me to reflect on certain religious concepts I was raised with and took for granted. To see my existence in this land as a temporal condition: I was not of this place and would never be of this place. I have learned to belong by learning some cultural traits and by making the language mine, but it never felt real. So many crucial parts of me were at odds with

my surroundings and the expectation projected onto me. Fleeting moments created the illusion of belonging, but a word or a question would crack open this carefully constructed notion of being 'the same' as everyone else. Coming of age for me coincided with the rise of what we have come to know now as political Islam. Something so dear to me invoked fear in millions. 'Allahu Akbar' spoken in a crowded street can create a frenzy with deathly consequences.

Entering public institutions as a Muslim meant being dissected and questioned constantly. I was too young and too idealistic to understand that my explanations of Islam being a religion of peace were falling into deaf ears. I believed in dialogue, in meeting, and in exchange, all the while being blind to power dynamics that still subjugate me. I questioned the non-Muslim majority that I encountered, but they rarely have to answer. I, on the other hand, feel obliged to answer, to take away fears, to reassure and to be a moderate Muslim: a Muslim who can be understood and maintained. A Muslim who uses reason and leaves holy texts in the sanctuary of the home. Their position is the default, the universal, whereas my position is that of the peculiar, the oddity, the particular.

Slowly but surely, the abundance of explanation ate away the enchantment Islam had for me like moths in old clothes. Islam in my life was reduced to empty rituals performed in haste. However, Allah is the best of planners, and through my activism, books, and conversation with both religious and irreligious people, I was able to find the beauty in Allahu Akbar. Language is limited, and the meaning of Allahu Akbar is hardly conveyed in words and phrases. Bouteldja speaks of the humility of this phrase and its transcended ability, but for me the meaning of this phrase is first and foremost found in rootedness: rootedness beyond materialism, beyond sensory understanding. The power of this phrase lies in the space it can create, a space that is accessible to all willing to prostrate in humility. It is a space with the possibility to transcend, but it is also a space that is grounded; it can help everyone to reflect on their positionality and help manage their ego. However, what does being grounded or rooted look like beyond that which is tangible? Islam has been, and always will be, one of my guiding principles. The phrase Allahu Akbar will always be a reminder of the fact that I am a "stranger or a traveler in this world"; it is the thread that sews every aspect of my life together. I am intrinsically motivated by a need to strive to make this world a more just place. Sometimes I get caught up and stray away from the 'why' that is forcing me to act in academia and activism. I get lost in believing in my own righteousness. I lose the notion of ambivalence. With ambivalence I do not mean carelessness. I care deeply, but I also am aware of the fact that my actions might not make a difference, at least not in a direct, linear, result-oriented way. I am invested in the process of struggling and stumbling with each other and with our traditions. Edward Said writes in *Reflection on Exile* that:

Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting,

one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal.

(2000, 239)

Along the same lines, I believe that independence and detachment are two key criteria that enable reflection on and questioning of our own position, ideas, and traditions. Those willing to engage genuinely with what it means to submit willingly have the ability to cross borders and barriers, to be uprooted and rooted at the same time. Through the sharing of conversations we mitigate across the different cultures, settings, and homes that we have come to call our own. In this metaphorical exile we learn to communicate and to let go of control, so that our conversations transform our understanding of each other and the world we inhabit. Through your eyes and mind, Matthea, I get to reflect and know my own tradition, culture, and home. The external gaze often is harsh and divides us. It assumes that we inhabit different worlds, but *Allahu Akbar*, a sense of something ephemeral connects us beyond the limits of the exterior.

Conclusion

We have attempted to capture all that we shared in conversation throughout the years. It was a difficult but rewarding process. We changed our minds so many times regarding the format and the topics we wanted to reflect on, but we kept returning to religion, academia, positionality, and knowledge productions. We settled for speaking from the heart by being vulnerable and by opening up about our complex realities. We tried to do justice to and articulate the asymmetry of the questions and concerns we have been dealing with, so that more equal conversations may emerge. We hope that we were able to present an alternative way of relating to each other and to important aspects of our material world. We invite you to let go of the illusion of control and to look for commonality even when it is not apparent. We invite you to change the dynamics that hold us in place by flipping them upside down. We invite you above all to create space for messiness and unfinished thoughts. Let discomfort and doubt guide you in a world where everyone seems to be all knowing.

Notes

- 1 Students who do not fit the normalised, universalised, and neutralised frames in terms of whiteness, gender, class, sexuality, secularity, or (post)colonial histories cannot but reflect on the discrepancies between their own embodied experiences and the ideals of a ‘scholar’ who is supposedly ‘as neutral as possible’ (gender-less, class-less, race-less, sex-less, meaning: male, white, heterosexual). This asymmetric divide has shaped our academic lives differently: unlike Matthea, Nawal was forced to reflect on race in academia, for example, as she could never enter the realm of ‘neutrality’ of whiteness, while Matthea could sometimes enter that realm.

- 2 In our understanding of religion-secular distinctions and the making of that divide, we built on the work of Asad (2003), Mahmood (2005) and many others, who have scrutinized how the ‘secular’ is not ‘neutral’ vis á vis religion, but rather produces particular types of ‘religion’ as acceptable, and delegitimizes other forms as unacceptable. Our approach in this article is also slightly different from what has been termed ‘critical secular studies’, since we aim to not only scrutinize this divide, but also normatively and theoretically engage with archives that have been excluded by the ‘secular’. See for a critical engagement with Asad and Mahmood from a global queer perspective Dahwan (2013).
- 3 I use the term ‘secularism’ here, in the same meaning as ‘religio-secularism’. This term does not indicate a particular ideological political stance on church-state relations here. Rather, the term refers to the making of religio-secular separation through institutional, discursive, and political shifts, practices, and inventions (see on the term ‘religio-secularism’, Jansen 2017; Dressler and Mandair 2011). It is understood as producing borders between acceptable religion (‘religion’ that is separated from the ‘secular’) and unacceptable religion (‘religion’ that transgresses these boundaries). In that sense, religio-secularism is intimately tied to the emergence of the category of ‘religion’: of what came to be considered ‘religion’, including its mirror images of improper religion or non-religion (such as Judaism, Islam), with which it has been contrasted.
- 4 For extensive analysis of supersessionism’s implication in race-making and (neo) colonial knowledge-making, see the forthcoming PhD dissertation of Matthea Westerduin at VU University in Amsterdam, “Displacements and loss in the Muslim question. Re-membering the making of race, religion, and whiteness in Europe and its colonies.” (working title)

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