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On Digital Decolonization

On Digital Decolonization: A Conversation with Morehshin Allahyari

Abdullah Qureshi

Abstract: In 2014 the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) began ruthless destruction of ancient and historical heritage, including sites as old as 3,000 years, in Iraq and Syria. A year later the world witnessed this through horrifying videos on social media. Responding to this unimaginable cultural loss, Iranian-born artist and activist Mohrehshin Allahyari initiated *Material Speculation: Isis*—creating 3D-printed replicas of twelve of the destroyed sculptures from the cities of Hatra and Nineveh. The project involved collecting extensive data and research with various historians, curators, and visual archives, which Allahyari placed on USB flash drives and embedded within the body of the statues. In her current series, *She Who Sees the Unknown*, she looks at stories from the South West Asian and North African (SWANA) region, re-figuring images of goddesses and djinns through a feminist lens as a way of weaving new magical narratives and speculating mythologies.

In this conversation with Allahyari, I discuss her artistic and research processes, unpacking issues of digital decolonization. The dialogue further addresses the philosophical underpinnings of her practice and looks at the use of technology as a means to reflect and challenge our collective political, social, and cultural pasts, presents, and futures.

Keywords: digital, decolonization, feminism, race

As an artist and researcher, thinking about queerness and migration from a Muslim perspective forms the core of my practice. In particular, I work with mythologies rooted in Islamic faith, history, and culture, re-thinking them from feminist and queer positionalities. Based in Finland, I expand these ideas within the context of Northern Europe, and set against the background of the "European Migrant Crises," specifically looking at narratives of LGBTIQ+ Muslim migrants as a way of complicating the understanding of Islam and challenging dominant structures of invisible whiteness in the region.

Situated within broader histories and legacies of colonization, Steve Garner discusses the problematic frameworks of constructing national identities and cultures in the post-colonial world that aspire to bring a diverse group of people together.[1] Garner continues by referring to invisible whiteness in the Nordic countries as colorblind racism, where "racism is a thing of the past, the province of pathological individuals, therefore not seeing or talking about 'race' is a way to banish racism."[2] As Finland turned one hundred in 2017, and celebrations of independence and Finnish-ness ensued, questions of what constitutes a Finn also began to emerge. Through first-hand accounts and experiences of immigrants, ideas of Finnish-ness and its rigid parameters have been visible and critiqued on various levels. For instance, from a museum perspective, earlier this year, I led a roundtable and panel discussion on queerness, art, and migration—where the absence of indigenous representation and the framing of art history in Finland as "international," when it was merely "European," were vehemently contested. Similarly, exclusions from gay nightclubs have also surfaced, wherein 2016 a clear pattern, specifically targeting and rejecting immigrants based on racism and Islamophobia, was identified and protested against.[3]

Addressing these concerns through theory, we can look to María Lugones, who proposes

"to read the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in terms of gender, race, and sexuality"—not as a way of furthering already existing understandings of gender and race in relationship to colonialism, but rather as a critique and re-reading of "modern capitalist colonial modernity itself."[4] This ties in particularly well with the work of Morehshin Allahyari, who responds to violent histories of colonization, terrorism, and border regimes—intersecting them with a feminist and woman of color point of view. In this conversation I address these issues through the lens of her artistic practice and research. Recognizing that Allahyari is US-based, the exchange is situated in the larger anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments that also resonate with the situation in Europe; allowing us to think about the growing concern around the politics of exclusion alongside decolonial strategies in the realm of the digital and technology.

The interview was conducted over Skype on March 11, 2019, and later transcribed and edited in its current format.

Abdullah: I want to begin with a question about location.[AAA] In earlier talks, you've been particular about stating that you were born and raised in Iran and that you moved to the US in 2007. You have also spoken about how the social, political, and cultural contradictions of growing up in these seemingly disparate spaces have informed your practice; how in Iran, people viewed the US as "evil." Meanwhile, in the US, you encountered stereotypically backward perceptions of your country of origin. During these last twelve years, we have seen the US become even more politically polarized, especially post-Trump. In retrospect, what has been your experience?

Morehshin: That's an excellent question. I have not been asked this before, and specifically in this way. I have also been thinking about this a lot, especially when I'm in conversation with my other Iranian and South West Asian and North African Alliance (SWANA)friends.[5] I would say 9/11 had a certain kind of influence and did something particular to our lives in terms of intensifying hate crimes and legitimizing racism and prejudices against us—from experiences in daily life in the West to challenges and oppression at airports and borders. But also what has happened in the last three years with the Muslim travel ban; a global trend, where we see the closing of borders. For example, Brexit—which has resulted in another level of violence. In many ways, I think we are still trying to wrap our heads around this and thinking about how to respond.

In the early years of my move, I recall feeling very confused about my identity. I felt very much in between, being an immigrant in the US, yet having strong ties and connections to Iran with family and friends. Thinking about this opened up concerns of exile and censorship in my art and research. I became interested in questions of self-regulation and cultural limitations. Despite being in the West now, I was thinking about what to share publicly to maintain a connection with home.

The less I censored myself, the more I was exiling myself, and this was a complicated and challenging position for me. Collaboration was another way I tried to make sense of this contentious relationship. I would organize and curate projects with US and Iranian artists to collectively challenge stereotypes; though I am no longer interested in this idea of being a "cultural ambassador." At this point, I see such a role as a burden placed upon people of color, who are expected to represent entire cultures and people to "educate" others. I am now much more interested in conversations, which ultimately can change the way I emotionally connect and

think about my current and previous home.

A few years later, I found myself working on a range of projects involving 3D printing and digital fabrication, and thinking about ways to use these tools to respond to socio-political issues. I started to become more interested in interrogating the intersections of being an immigrant, a woman, a woman of color, and living in the US. Here, I will say that I hated addressing identity politics directly in my work, and was interested in using the experience as a point of departure to create art. Rather than focusing on "educating" the West on my culture, I was interested in empowerment, where my future work opened access to people within SWANA. In many ways, this is also in response to recent and ongoing political things that in particular impact those in positions similar to mine. What I feel right now is a real disappointment. You know, what it's like for people like me who thought, "education is possible, change is possible" to find ourselves instead in 2019 dealing with all this crazy shit? It's shocking. I did not anticipate Trump becoming the president although I really had to step back afterward (after he was elected) and ask myself what did this shock say to me; perhaps that I didn't really understand America and its deep-rooted racism and colonialism in the way that it operates in reality. Many of us didn't.

A: I hear you. You talk about being stuck between worlds, and that you identify as an artist, activist, educator, and organizer. Looking at your projects and thinking about the various frameworks you employ within them, do you think the boundaries between artistic production, organization, activism, and pedagogy blur for you?

M: Absolutely. I would agree that these so-called categories do blur within my practice. When I

develop a project, I don't only produce artworks; often, I also organize participatory events within the gallery. I think about art activism as extending artistic spaces as sites to build and engage communities, as well as open up complicated concepts outside the immediate domain of "Art." For example, when I present an artist talk, it is as much about art as it is about colonialism, immigration regimes, capitalism, etc.

A: Another important element within your practice is the digital, and more broadly, technology where you use it as a form of resistance as well as archiving and preservation of history. We see this in the project *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015–2016), where you have also described technology as a philosophical tool. Would you explain this further?

M: Similarly to my position on art-making, I don't see the point of technology for technology's sake. I am interested in using digital tools, such as 3D printers and VR for resistance. How can you use these modes of production to make things that are invisible, visible? Or as a way to comment on and address situations that need to be exposed? I feel there is a lot of potential in the digital, and much of it still needs to be explored. An example of this investigation includes *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* (2016), which I co-authored with writer-artist, Daniel Rourke. These projects try to think about technology as this machine that has the potential for electrolytic assistance in time.

A: Picking up on something you said earlier about not doing work that was purely about identity, I started thinking about your engagement with the digital as a medium in a formalist way. However, your statement now resists that too, where you reject medium for medium's sake,

taking a position that is complicating everything, rejecting to fit in a box. Do you agree?

M: Yes. And I like complicating things. For me, this is critical thinking, where those who are the subject of critique by mainstream media and technology reclaim power and challenge hegemonic structures set by the white man. So for me, it is essential to think continually about how to carve out our space, especially in contexts where it is absent. I try to pass on this way of thinking through teaching as well. I have been very involved within the art technology—new media—digital art departments. And over the last ten years I have felt a visible lack of the presence of women, especially women of color, in these fields. I have had to create this space, pushing myself through the door, forcefully having visibility and agency.

A: I guess it is not only about the lack of visibility of women or people of color in the technological field but also the geopolitical relationship with how technological waste operates, ending up in spaces outside the West that are silently contributing in terms of labor. So for instance, I'm thinking about Pakistan and India, which contribute extensively to the production of apps and games, and yet the visibility is very low. Instead, what we find are large amounts of land being used as sites to dump old monitors, CPUs, cables, etc.[6]

Moving forward, your project *Material Speculation: ISIS* is a response to the viral videos that show the horrible destruction of 3,000-year-old artifacts in Iraq and Syria.[7] To preserve that history—documenting it for future generations, you developed this project where you created twelve 3D replicas of specific objects. The process involved collecting extensive data and research seeking detail that sometimes was just not there. Earlier in lectures and talks, you have spoken about not finding enough photographs. So what was this process like for you, and what

were the other challenges you encountered along the way?

M: Well, *Material Speculation: ISIS* was one of the first deeply research-based projects that I worked on starting from 2015, which is when the violent videos came out. At the time I was looking critically at oil, thinking about plastic and how oil is the raw material of plastic, and how plastic is one of the most used materials in 3D printing. I was interested in these connections, so when I saw the videos, I wanted to recreate the destroyed artifacts. But as you mentioned, after many months of research, I realized that a lot of information was missing. And it was hard to gather a full scan of the objects from the images we had. At times their names would not match up. For example, when I was looking at texts from Arabic to English, the translation would be off. So I became a historian, an artist, and an activist, and all the roles started to blur, as you say. It took almost a year to finish the project. The research part of it was so important that I decided to include a memory card and flash drive inside the body of the sculptures after I 3D printed them. The memory cards contained PDF files, images from the artifacts, and all sort of correspondence that I had with different historians and scholars. The sealed files are 3D printable—and at that point, I was thinking of these sculptures as time capsules to keep information for the future. Once everything related to this project came out in 2016, there was a lot of press and buzz around it. And you know, that is always weird because the media, especially in the West, likes to take its position. I would get titles like this artist is fighting ISIS with 3D printing . . . crazy things, which I had incredibly conflicted feelings about. At the same time, I started to see a lot of companies and different institutions starting to do similar projects. Many of these companies are in Silicon Valley or parts of the world where they would like to use these technologies, including 3D scanning and printing in SWANA. Then they would 3D scan various

historical sites and artifacts, and as these projects started to get so trendy, I began to question, what is happening? Why are these people interested? What is it that they're getting from this?

After I investigated, I realized that there are a lot of complexities and problematics involved in this kind of work. Upon completion of the digital reconstruction, these institutions own rights to the data, refusing free and open access to the files. At a conference addressing digital construction and archaeology, I learned from one of these corporations that they had scanned "amazing" material in Iran. Once I requested access, they told me that it could only be granted to specific institutions and not private individuals. Which is strange to me. The material collected is from my country of birth, and I am an artist who is working on these issues, yet I don't have the right to see this information. So it became clear to me that there is a lot of profit involved in this work.

A: And this is what you define as digital colonization? From *Material Speculation: ISIS*, you only publicly released data for King Uthal as a strategy to counter these corporations. What are some of the other ways you are thinking around this?

M: Yeah. I started to think about: how can I talk about this alongside my work and how can I raise awareness about it during the lectures I present? Often people look at me with such shock. As if they've never thought about it before. If you think about colonialism from a cultural perspective, taking a walk through the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the British Museum, you see specific objects, and wonder if the collectors had permission to take them? And how did they end up here? You know, from particular parts of the world. That kind of aftermath of colonialism is very much visible. We know it. We understand it. When it comes to digital colonialism, a term

I coined, people don't think of it in a big way, because it is still very much invisible. On some institutions' websites, open-source data is now occasionally shared. Their positions have changed in the last four years, even though they still maintain ownership through copyrights. For example, let's look at a 3D scan of the Temple of Eshmun in Lebanon, which is available on the website of CyArk (www.cyark.org). You try and download it, and you have to agree to a range of clauses that do not allow you to use any of the data commercially because it falls under the creative commons act. Meaning, if even the Government of Lebanon wanted to use it commercially, in tourism for instance, then they have to get permission to do so. So the copyright discussion is very complex.

To me, the best way to continue dealing with this kind of oppression is to keep on writing about it, publicizing it, and pushing to create genuinely open and free access or why/who has ownership of such data.

When you confront these institutes with critique, they don't know what to do with it. Speaking at the Google Art and Culture Institute, I told them how I think they are problematic as an organization that gathers digital data from around the world, presenting it online without acknowledging any geopolitical complexities, specifically on projects like Open Heritage. The reason I haven't released the rest of the data I collected is that I don't know what decision I should be making about this. But if anything, I would want the decision to be made by Iraqi institutions or government. Rather than me thinking that, oh, sharing the files as open source material is automatically good. We have to ask who really has access to such data and material and on what platforms? What kind of power structures are in place when this digital data will be shared and distributed, and how does it further perpetuate those systems?

Some of the Western art institutions are also making money from VR experiences of

sites, which, in some cases, were destroyed as a direct result of their government's policies on war.

So with digital colonialism, I think it's about the law, it's about access, and it's about questioning the involvement of these institutions. In particular, when it comes to the destruction of heritage. We need to challenge white savior complexes, where there is the false belief of being "good" or the heroes that are trying to save this history from these "barbarians."

To me, the problem is how so many people remove themselves and fail to understand their complicity in the conflict. Every time I do a talk on *Material Speculation: ISIS*, I talk about ISIS violence alongside US military violence. I started to do this gradually, where after I presented the project, I would begin to tug this issue, and people didn't know what to think about that. They don't think about the US military in this context. I mean, the US military has involved itself in so many conflicts, and destroyed so many historical sites, right! In SWANA—Iraq, Afghanistan, the list goes on.

A: Yeah, and I get that. There is a tendency for people to disassociate from this issue, and not be open to how interconnected these things are. There is a desire not to give oneself the pain of realizing how everything is historically rooted in this hierarchical and hegemonic violence. And recognize that in many ways all this is a direct consequence of colonialism.

In this sense, what is incredible about *Material Speculation: ISIS* is that as well as being a time capsule, the project is a catalyst addressing a whole range of issues related to digital colonialism. In your most recent project *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2017–present), while staying within the domain of the digital and archives, you are also starting to look at historical stories and narratives within the realm of fantasy. It takes a remarkably different approach where

you are re-working those narratives and representations. How do you feel this extends your existing methods on decolonization?

M: In both of these works, *Material Speculation: ISIS* and *She Who Sees the Unknown*, there is a relationship between technology and the past. In *She Who Sees the Unknown* I am particularly interested in the re-appropriation of history, because it's a past where a lot of injustice has been committed through ways of representation—especially toward women. So I am going back and looking at these monstrous images of jinns or genies and re-approaching these figures as genderless queer figures from different ancient stories originating in SWANA. A lot of these stories are misrepresented or forgotten. In many ways I think this is a shared experience across a lot of cultures. Except perhaps for Indian culture, where you see several powerful female deities in mythologies, the field of superheroes or figures with special abilities is incredibly male-dominated. In Iran, where I grew up, 99 percent of mythological stories featured men, and I always wondered, where are the women? I was keen to excavate female or genderless figures or those between the human and the monstrous. We don't know what gender they are really, given that these characters exist in ancient stories. Once I have found a few figures, I take them out of their context, keeping their superpowers intact. I situate them in new stories that make sense to us in the now or the future. I focus my narratives on SWANA or the power dynamic that exists between the West and East—so with each, I create different topics accompanied by sculptural elements.

I like 3D modeling and 3D printing of sculptures and talismans that re-appropriate each figure and go beyond the gallery and its walls, mimicking the work I am interested in my activism. Simultaneously, I am also building an archive of these figures. An archive that

currently doesn't exist in SWANA, so at the end of the research, I want to have this material available online. I also do a lot of performances, lectures, and events, and invite others to participate and talk about different issues concerning this. For me, the power of this work is in two things: one is this concept of refiguring as a position of activation and activism from a feminist perspective—reimagining the past to create multiple presents and futures. The second concept is that of embracing monstrosity, which has a long history within the feminist movement, from Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) to Rosi Braidotti's book *The Posthuman* (2013). Through these ideas, you can create a compelling position that challenges the negative reading of monstrous female or the female jinn, and reverses it as an empowering one; in essence, critiquing various colonial misinterpretations.

A: Toward my final question, I want to probe a word that you've mentioned a few times: "Futures." There's a lot of discussion around this term right now—queer futures, black futures, feminist futures, etc. Where do you see yourself within this discourse? And what do you think the future looks like in the next 5 to 10 years with all of these ongoing conversations?

M: You know, it's fascinating to think about five years ago, how certain things that are kind of popular now, where everyone is talking about them on social media, just weren't there. We didn't exist as a conversation. I think about five years ago and how it was the beginning of people starting to make noise around all-white male panels. And now, there is so much more out there, in the form of writing, conversations, and understanding. I think about that, and am like wow, what are the next five years going to look like?

What are the things that right now feel invisible and are not taken as seriously as issues

that are going to feel much more important then and will be much closer to exploiting and having access to certain kinds of voices and platforms that feel normal to amplify—the problem we have with the right, for instance. I think amplification is a big thing, when you think about the future we want as queer people, women of color, etc. How to amplify our voices? There is this saying that no one is voiceless. There are just voices that are currently silenced or not being heard.

So the future I want to see, you know, five years is near future, and for that, I want to see small things. For example, we still have all-male white panels. So, I guess, I am less interested in thinking about solutions, and instead, would like to see micro changes and actions that can have macro influences, leading to possible resolutions. I want to be in a future that we don't even have to talk about an International Women's Day. At this point, I don't even know if there is a longer future. It's so funny when you think about more extended futures.

I don't know if you feel that way, like, to have an image beyond five years?

A: Yeah, I guess I'm responding to or reflecting upon the incredible work that is happening in different parts of the world, on consciously imagining and reimagining pasts, presents, and futures. I see this happening in so many different domains, and I guess based on that, as a collective, there is an ongoing movement of reclaiming history, challenging the past to come up with a future that could make sense or be a better one. I think for me, I can't say where it would be, but I am interested in what that could look like, where so much of history is being fictionalized, and at times being altered. I think, for me, that's a very powerful act.

M: Yeah, I feel that in a lot of the work that we are doing, we are also trying to break this distance of past and present and future. We are trying to move away from a linear perspective of

time, which is Western. I think we're all doing work that is cyclical. Did I say that word right?

A: Yeah, maybe circular.

M: Yeah. So it's like a circular future, where people are talking about it as a spiral in some ways. There isn't a direct pathway, instead things turn and layers of time merge into each other. This is why I am also interested in playing around with these ideas by bringing the past to exist alongside imagined stories from the future in the same space.

I am grateful that I live now as a woman of color and not twenty years ago in the art world. I think there's so much space now, much more to do the work I want to do. I mean, one could argue, maybe I want to live in the future, and that may be better. But in general, when I think about the now, I am happy to see the multiplicity of voices that are aware and confronting the fact that there is still a glass ceiling, especially when it comes to major physicians, merit majors, or the CEO of an organization, or who gives more keynote talks, etc. Those spaces are still very male-driven, but yeah, I do think things will change, and they will change our way.

Morehshin Allahyari is an artist, activist, writer, and educator. She was born and raised in Iran and moved to the United States in 2007. Her work deals with the political, social, and cultural contradictions we face every day. She thinks about technology as a philosophical toolset to reflect on objects and as a poetic means to document our personal and collective lives and struggles in the twenty-first century.

Abdullah Qureshi is a Pakistani-born artist, educator, and cultural producer. Within his practice he is interested in using painting and collaborative methodologies to address personal histories, traumatic pasts, and childhood memories. Based at Aalto University in Finland, his ongoing doctoral project, entitled "Mythological Migrations: Imagining Queer Muslim Utopias," he examines formations of queer identity and resistance in Muslim migratory contexts.

Notes

1. Steve Garner, "Injured Nations, Racialized States and Repressed Histories: Making Whiteness Visible in Nordic Countries," *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 20, no. 6 (2014): 407–22.

2. Garner, "Injured Nations."

3. Abdullah Qureshi, "Queer Migrations: The Case of an LGBT Cafe/Queers Without Borders," in *Feminism and Queer in Art Education*, ed. Aniina Suominen and Tiina Pusa, 91—115 (Helsinki: Aalto Arts Books, 2018).

4. María Lugones, "Toward a Decolinial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.

5. For more information, see www.swanaalliance.com.

6. For more information, see https://www.dawn.com/news/935242.

7. For more information, see https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/09/150901-isis-destruction-looting-ancient-sites-iraq-syria-archaeology/.