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Creative Fellow

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The Future of Storytelling: Decolonial Filmmaking Methodology developed while making Liminality, a feature film using Collaborative Storytelling Practices
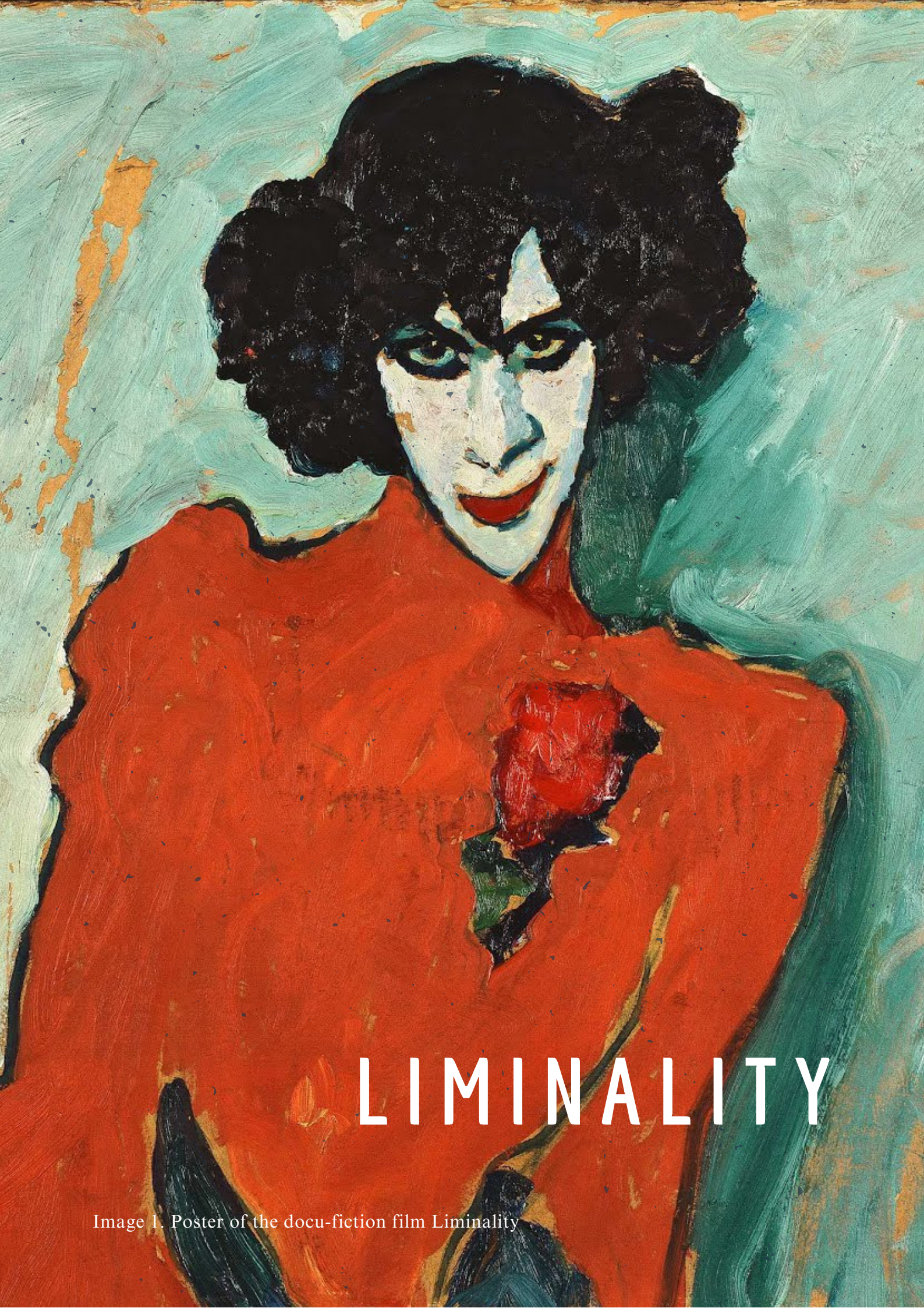
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The Future of Storytelling:

Decolonial Filmmaking Methodology developed while making Liminality, a

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LIMINALITY

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Image 2. Video Still from the short video Embodied Arts 2020

Video link: https://vimeo.com/529481702

1. INSIGHT

For the last four years, I have been working on an endeavour of decolonial filmmaking aimed at changing the way we make films and tell stories. The urge to create such a radical shift in making stories arose while making the film Liminality, a feature docufiction film that intertwine the search of me and my sister's quest to break the chain of intergenerational pain that we carry in our bodies by collectively imagining a mystical land wherein we meet trans*gender[1] individuals from Germany who find solace from the stresses of *othering* by being liminal. The journey of making this film led me to come in contact with many individuals with embodied narratives of living a life in the margin. I observed that the storyteller, filmmaker and the human in me finds the self in an unusual power dynamic when in contact with my collaborators. On reflecting on the genesis of this feeling and actively addressing it, I felt the need to acknowledge the role of the 'technologies of *othering'* that we all carry in our bodies. Taking a leap of faith from that point, this quest became a part of the creative process itself leading to a journey of finding solace and peace from the many stresses arising from living in an unequal world. With the support of the CIRCE fellowship, I have been further developing this methodology and in this paper, I'll cite some ideas that have emerged whilst this endeavour. I have provided a concise abstract below for the convenience of the busy reader summarizing the contents discussed in the paper.

1.1 Fracturing the Individualistic and Mind-Centric Colonial paradigm

Individuals are embodiments of not only their personal narratives but also the collective and painful histories of their ancestries, communities, including the legacies of colonial genocides, slavery, and the Holocaust. I'm critiquing the predominant Western paradigm of individualism for perpetuating a perspective that overlooks the intertwining of personal and collective histories, thereby obscuring the repercussions of historical traumas, intergenerational pain. The inherited traumas and privileges from these historical events demands a collective acknowledgment and confrontation of the internalized violence we all

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[1] Trans*gender is an umbrella term used for individuals who have an identity or expression different from the gender assigned at birth. It is an umbrella term for non-normative expressions of gender or sexed embodiment, including transsexual, transvestite, drag queen or king, and genderqueer. Throughout the text I'd be using the term 'trans*' as a short-hand for the umbrella term transgender.

carry within us collectively. This is achieved by boldly shifting the focus of the body wisdom unearthing the myriad stories that the body holds.

1.2 The power of storytelling in Softening Othering

Storytelling with decolonial filmmaking praxis prioritizes the embodied narratives and engages in a collaborative journey. It is about creating a process that fosters mutual understanding, acknowledgment, and a shared sense of identity and experience, revealing the multifaceted nature of our existence which is often overshadowed by binary thinking. Such storytelling becomes a transformative tool that extends beyond mere representation, enabling a softening and a deeper exploration of the experiences of *othering*, thus creating a space for mutual healing, empowerment, and a reclamation of agency in the shared journey of discovery of the self and the collective.

1.3 On Orally transmitted stories of resilience told with tenderness and humour

Historically, the legitimacy of knowledge from marginalized communities, often orally transmitted, has been overshadowed by restricted access to academia, leaving the authenticity and representation of such narratives in the hands of well-versed storytellers. Decolonial filmmaking seeks to disrupt this imbalance by valuing and legitimizing these oral narratives, emphasizing true collaboration and mutual transformation between the storyteller and the provider of the story, thereby challenging traditional knowledge hierarchies. Acknowledging the deadweight of the stresses of *othering*, tenderness and humor are underscored as indispensable elements in decolonial filmmaking practice.

1.4 Imagination & Körperkino

Decolonial filmmaking emerges as a practice that meticulously dissects and critiques the entrenched narratives of violence that are perpetuated. It actively makes us question why we are doing what we do and for whom. *Körperkino* is a practice that emerges in this framework where we collectively imagine relating to each other's embodied stories. It

prioritizes the cultivation of a space created with mutual trust, acknowledgment and continuous engagement with embodied traumas and memories. It is not merely an artistic endeavor but a journey of long-term transformation and relationship-building, foregrounding the significance of critical reflection and conscious creation in storytelling. The conscious interweaving of authentic, lived experiences of traumas, and triumphs forge a path towards an inclusive and interconnected understanding of the human condition.

Image 3. Video Still from the work in progress cut of Liminality Chapter 1

2. CREATIVE ENDEAVOUR

"Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." — Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." — Maya Angelou

2.1 Power of storytelling

2.1.1 On shaping perspectives and identities.

Stories, be the ones we read in books and poems or the ones we watch in films or series, be it the real life anecdotes shared over a coffee table or a living room couch, or from the memories that we hear from our parents and peers, and even the histories taught by teachers about emperors and leaders; significantly alter our perspectives, the way we see the world, and even our actions by influencing the way we interact with the world.

Storytelling is a distinctive trait innate to humans, a facet that seemingly defines us. We are inherently driven by it, whether it manifests in the creation of epic mythologies portraying eternal battles between good and evil or, through spinning of intricate conspiracies—connecting disparate dots within incomplete datasets.

Internal narratives profoundly effect our mental well-being. Stagnant inner monologues, often rooted in negative beliefs and experiences, can be detrimental to one's mental health. These ingrained scripts, particularly those steeped in negativity that arise from adverse experiences, have the power to significantly impair one's mental health and ways of perceiving the world.

For individuals immersed in a barrage of stories of deprivation and distress, the impact of such narratives can escalate to life-threatening proportions. When communities on the margins, already grappling with the pervasive impacts of systemic oppression, find themselves immersed in unrelenting cycles of stress and adversity, the stories that are told,

circulated and exchanged within their circles become pivotal. These stories dictate both the trajectory and the pace at which these communities can transcend limiting beliefs of oppressive circumstances. The tales and accounts shared within these communities can act as either chains that bind or keys that unlock.

2.1.2 Who gets to tell the story about whom?

Othering is the dehumanising process of portraying someone as fundamentally different from oneself often based on social factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, bodily traits, abilities. From interpersonal hierarchies to international boundaries, the enduring silence surrounding the implications of stories and the mechanisms of *othering* allows for the perpetuation of such debilitating paradigms from generation to generation. The consequences of *othering* thus reverberate through time, echoing within the shared stories and lived experiences of communities, shaping perceptions, and molding realities in ways both subtle and profound.

Storytelling has *othering* dimension too. For eons, the access to the megaphone of mass storytelling has been limited to the very few. The prevailing ethos on who gets to tell whose stories are relics of a time when European explorers, arriving on distant shores, unilaterally asserted dominion over everything that their gaze fell on, including the narratives and stories of the indigenous populations they encountered.

Aimé Césaire in his phenomenal text 'Discourse on Colonialism' derisively points out M. Caillois' observation: '"The only ethnography is white." It is the West that studies the ethnography of the others, not the others who study the ethnography of the West. (1955:20) Ethnography and documentary filmmaking practices have been built on the imperialistic modes of extraction rooted in the colonial and exotic gaze on the *Other.*

> As an integral part of the colonial capitalist domain, Europeans also achieved the control of subjectivity, culture and especially the production of knowledge. In the concomitant temporal perspective of world history constructed in Europe, colonized peoples were placed in the past and at the bottom of an evolutionary trajectory whose culmination was Europe. (Quijano 2000: 533-534, 541-542)

To this day, these dynamics persist, be it the obsession of poverty porn or exotication of indigenous practices, the structures of modern day storytelling and filmmaking are rooted in imperialistic paradigms. The enduring frameworks born out of these structures continue to influence which stories receive the resources and platforms to be told, which narratives receive the validation and which films get the subsequent distribution and dissemination. The field of filmmaking and storytelling, much like numerous contemporary realities, is interwoven with the legacies of colonialism, perpetuating a cycle where voices are silenced or amplified based on antiquated and inequitable structures. The stories that are privileged and those that are marginalized reflect the enduring imprints of a history of violence and dominance.

2.1.3 Fracturing the colonial gaze

One of the significant markers of traditional documentary /filmmaking practices in my observation is the paradigm of assumption that a filmmaker / researcher who goes into the research field has to come out of it with a quantitative outcome/ product (a film, a book or a research report) about the *subjects*. The researcher approaches his *subjects* with questions (stemming from their intermittent curiosity) that they believe they are entitled to *know* for the sake of knowledge production for the sympathies of the imagined audience who'll consume and access the finished product. For the longest time this pattern of knowledge production and storytelling practices paved way to extractive forms of processes wherein the researcher/filmmaker makes a film about the people they want to study and leaves the space without effectively accommodating the impact they had on the community and vice versa into the research process itself.

> … historical configurations of power and knowledge generate a clear asymmetry within this relativization. The powerful are not accustomed to being relativized...It is therefore not merely a question of communicating across borders but of discerning the forces which generate the borders in the first place (Shohat and Stam 1995: 359)

With a strong desire to shift the power laced colonial gaze, I have been on a long term journey immersing myself in a quest to make films, tell stories by fracturing the power structures that lay in the process of filmmaking. To actualise this, I have been developing a

methodology on renewed ways to make films that are rooted in collaborative endeavor, in finding mutuality and creating a shared reality through filmmaking.

2.2 Collaborative storytelling as an antidote and an endeavour

Treating a film merely as knowledge production or artistic creation endeavour is like taking its edges off. Any form of research/film has its merits if and when the relationship dynamics between all the stakeholders involved are well addressed right from the beginning. It derives its strength when it's treated as a shared activity with exchange of stories, knowledge, skills and thereby reflecting and speculating what one's role as the author(s), filmmaker, storyteller, collaborator, contributor, and audience is.

My artistic practice is deeply rooted in the decolonial imagination where - trans*, queer, disabled, black, and brown bodies join forces to share their unique stories in relation to one another. Drawing from my embodied experiences of the violence of *othering*, I've collaborated with artists and culture practitioners from around the world from disadvantaged backgrounds at Oyoun Berlin, working to bring underrepresented narratives to the forefront. For the last four years I have been developing a feature length docu-fiction film 'Liminality' wherein I explore the being and belonging of the body collaborating with trans'gender bodies in Germany while telling the story of me and my sister breaking familial traumatic cycles. During the development of the project, I have been reimagining the process of filmmaking itself by constantly reinventing ways to work with each other. The many experiments that came from it I have put them into the framework of Decolonial Filmmaking which I have had the opportunity to teach at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg and Frei Universität Berlin. An integral aspect of such a perspective is to investigate and thereby establish a clear intention on why we make films, why we create stories and who benefits from them.

2.2.1 Imagining together

In decolonial filmmaking practices, imagining together with marginalized and stressed-out bodies is not merely an intellectual exercise; it's an embodied activity that has the potential to be transformative for everyone involved. Imagining together involves the co-creation and mutual shaping of stories and embodied knowledge. It challenges the traditional paradigms where knowledge is often viewed as a commodity, owned, and

transferred by dominant groups. Engaging in collective imagination opens space for pluralistic experiences, perspectives, and realities that transcend the daily narratives of struggle, oppression and body politics.

The ethos of creating "a film with you rather than a film about you" underscores the essence of imagining and co-creating something that does not exist until now. With the approach the goal is to disrupt the traditional power dynamics inherent in the filmmaking process, it also aims to create something unique local to the embodied experience but with a universal appeal. To discover the transformative power of creating and collaborating on storytelling and filmmaking paves way to claim ownership of our own narratives and gaining agency to tell it. Fostering such an attitude is an act of empowerment. What follows thereafter is to find mutualities in each other's embodied narratives- of pain and laughter.

Image 4. An AI generated avatar with Aran, one of the protagonists. The image was made with DALL.E using prompts that were mutually created in the collaborative storytelling process

3. CREATIVE PROCESS

"You have to tell your own story simultaneously as you hear and respond to the stories of others" — *Elizabeth Alexander*

I have dedicated the past four years to my ongoing project, and during the last six months of my CIRCE fellowship tenure, I had the opportunity to collaborate with two liminal (trans* and non-binary) individuals in Germany. Central to my methodology is the profound importance of building relationships with my collaborators. Delving into the intricacies of othering dynamics in impersonal interactions, I am discerning and selective about whom I choose to work with. Establishing trust is paramount, as the collaborative process involves significant time spent together, grappling with intersubjective challenges related to our existence within society. This speculative and somewhat phenomenological approach necessitates a considerable investment of time and bodily resources, resulting in unique and irreplicable insights emerging from long-term collaborations. Moreover, the relationships forged extend well beyond the confines of research and filming. They evolve into genuine friendships, to say the least.

Over the past six months, I deepened my work with two collaborators: Aran and Jespa, based in Berlin and Hannover Germany respectively. The fellowship also provided me with the opportunity to seek collaborators in the UK. In early May, during my exploration, I had the pleasure of meeting D, a liminal artist based in London and Berlin. I am captivated by their perspective, particularly their positioning as a future being, engaging in speculative discussions about the future and its implications for trans* bodies. Living in the UK as a person of color with roots traced back to Nigerian migration, I as an Indian discovered a shared resonance in navigating the colonial legacies we carry. However, given the time-intensive nature of my work, particularly in cultivating relationships, I redirected my focus to working intensely with Aran and Jespa for the summer months.

Aran and I met weekly once, dedicating four to five hours to intense discussions and body work, all within the ritual of brewing green tea and sharing meals. Our efforts culminated in a profound understanding of our shared objectives and by the end of September we were able to arrive at 'what we wanted to say'. With Jespa, an entire weekend in early June was spent analyzing the patterns of our gendered behaviors and integrating them into our intergenerational narratives. We worked remotely for the next months analyzing our

findings. We creatively utilized AI tools such as DALL-E, Mid-Journey, and ChatGPT to visualize our ideas. In early October, we aim to film two distinct scenes with Aran and Jespa, around the culmination of the fellowship period, alongside my sister, Anjana Shakeela Natarajan.

In the following passages, I will highlight some of the thought tools that underpin my practice. While these tools have evolved over the past four years, they have been refined with precision in the last six months during the fellowship period.

3.1 Shifting The Focus On The Body And The Many Embodied Narratives It Holds

3.1.1 Fracturing The Mind-Body Duality

René Descartes is famously known for his statement: "Cogito, ergo sum" Latin for "I think, therefore I am." This statement is foundational for Descartes' epistemology and reflects his emphasis on the mind in understanding existence and reality. subsequently leading to the philosophical idea of mind-body dualism. The concept of mind-body duality postulates that the mind and body are fundamentally different natures—one nonphysical and the other physical with the mind often perceived as superior due to its capacity for reason, thought, and consciousness, whereas the body is seen as a mechanical entity governed by the laws of physics and biology. This concept has profoundly influenced Western philosophical, scientific, and medical thought.

This duality has led to a hierarchical valuation of the mind over the body in Western cultures, often emphasizing intellectual pursuits and rationality as the highest forms of human achievement. The body, with its corporeal and transient nature, is often marginalized and considered inferior to the eternal and non-material mind. Such a dichotomy encourages a fragmented perception of the self. It creates an internal divide where the body is often treated as an object—a vessel that carries the mind. This fragmentation can lead to a disconnection from our bodily sensations, emotions, and needs, fostering a lack of holistic self-understanding and self-awareness. This dichotomy can inadvertently diminish the intricate connection between our physical experiences and our mental perceptions, leading to an oversight of the body's narratives and its integral role in shaping our stories.

In my filmmaking practices, I intentionally fracture this particular dichotomous thought emphasizing on the bodily wisdom we possess. In the context of storytelling, my creative process focuses on bringing forth the stories from marginalized bodies and communities about maneuvering the world through senses, movements, and interactions. In this collaborative process, it's imperative to acknowledge and thereby explore the weight of *othering* and similar traumas that we carry in our bodies. By placing value on these experiences, I am interested in shedding light on the full spectrum of human interaction adding depth in the understanding of self and the environment. From moving from the abstract and identifying that the lingering effects of these stresses live in the flesh, blood and bones of individuals, often transcending generations. By identifying it, we make the invisible in us visible. Thereafter using different techniques we explore connections in each other's stories, we explore our shared mutuality.

3.1.2 Bodily Echoes: Artistic Reciprocity

Embodied Arts festival was a performing arts festival produced by Oyoun in 2020. The essence of the festival was to bring forth the many memories that a queer, migrant, diasporic identifying body holds. The festival opened the stage to share them in the form of performing arts formats viz., dance, theater, music and video art. Heading the Digital Media Production department at Oyoun, I was incharge of the task to make a teaser video for the festival. I wished to deviate from the usual spectacle/highlight filled trailer content and wanted to engage in a self reflexive conceptual piece. For distilling the essence of the festival, I chose to reflect on the embodied memories my body holds by penning a poem on the *affect*[2] of *othering*. On the day of filming, I recited this poem to the artists, who, in turn, responded through movements for the camera, embodying their own lived experiences of discrimination and empowerment. While filming Exoce, one of the artists, I started moving and dancing (holding my camera) with him. I must say that Exoce's movements sent me into a trance and halfway into the filming, we were engaged in a duet both courteous of each other's presence. This wasn't planned and thereby was a bodily response of mine to Exoce's

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[2] "Affect" constitutes a complex and multifaceted concept within academic discourse, primarily addressing the realm of non-conscious and unformulated experiences of emotion or feeling. This notion is distinct from "emotion," a more structured and conscious realization typified by psychophysiological expressions, biological reactions, and reflective mental states. Affect can manifest both as a verb, denoting influence or alteration, typically of a deleterious nature, and as a noun, symbolizing the external display of emotions, sentiments, and desires. In the context of this work,, "affect" is instrumental in delving into the non-verbal, embodied nuances and manifestations pivotal to the conceptual infrastructure of our discourse, signifying the myriad ways in which human interactions are shaped by and reciprocally shape our affective experiences.

movements which were in turn a response to my words. The images thus created appearing in the video are in its true essence our bodily echoes to each other.

In the process of making the Embodied Arts Teaser I, the filmmaker, became an active participant, an invisible character/performer holding the camera. Embodied memories are stored in one's bodies and when they are communicated and reciprocated, they become real. Pivoting bodily responses and integrating such reciprocities into the actual filmic work is a certain way to emphasize on the filmmaker and protagonist's relationship without necessarily verbalizing and over contextualizing the process itself. The images and soundscape thus created are coded with the essence of this communication. An awareness of the body and its reciprocities maneuvers a mechanism of exchange and sharing of vulnerabilities and joy. Thus the process of artistically reciprocating to each other's bodily memories becomes an active site for holistic creation and shared healing.

3.2 Giving Complete Agency And Sharing Ownership With The Community Being Represented

When we delve into storytelling, especially through the lens of a camera, it's vital to intertwine my collaborators in every step of the filmmaking process. To ensure that their truths are painted with authenticity, we commit to the process itself; of finding mutuality to our shared lived realities. Thus film and making of the film becomes the vessel for us to come together, to delve deeper into our embodied narratives, and indulge in creating a shared reality. Pursuing a common objective of creating a film renders each collaboration distinct. However, there exist fundamental values and principles that serve as the cornerstone for all, including:

3.2.1 Claiming ownership

Establishing ownership involves addressing and resolving the following questions:

- Who's Doing It?
The act of claiming ownership involves identifying that the stories emerging are from the self and hence the self has complete agency to possess, alter, and share these narratives. It demands discerning the legitimacy of such narratives, the right to articulate and represent

such stories.

- Why Is It Being Done And For Whom?

One of the pivotal traits in my practice is to dig deep into the motivation behind embarking on such a creative collaborative endeavour. Why are we doing this, why are we making this film, why do these stories need to be told, whom am I telling this for are some of the questions that we confront and work with right at the beginning of the collaborative process. Such an introspection helps me and my collaborators to see each other in our expectations and motivations. We probe whether the intention is to empower, to educate, to create awareness, or something else. Thereafter we create a shared intention that helps us bind right from the start. This shared manifesto becomes a reliable anchor when we face challenges in our process.

- What does one get in return and when?

I've frequently noted that many of my collaborators have encountered various storytellers in the past, yet they bear the lingering scars of feeling exploited for their narratives. Storytellers, be it researchers, filmmakers or journalists, find a certain voyeuristic interest in the tales of oppression and pain thereby perpetuating the same extractive processes to get stories 'out' of bodies in the margin. With the awareness that my collaborators often carry these abrasive memories, I intentionally bring the conversation of 'what will you get in return' right at the start of the collaboration. With uncompromising honesty and transparency, I discuss the constraints of my available resources. Therefore, I clarify from the outset the limits of compensation and remuneration I can offer. Subsequently, I invite my collaborators to reflect on what they anticipate receiving in return and how they envision the process contributing to their journeys of healing and transformation. Nearly every time, my long-term collaborators have valued this candid dialogue as it lays the foundation for establishing a bond of trust from the get-go, allowing us to envision ways to co-create a process that is enriching for both parties. It also gave us an opportunity to counter the extractive methods of telling stories that we have been exposed to.

3.3 Köperkino

3.3.1 From Kopfkino to Körperkino

Köperkino, literally translating to body cinema, is a concept I use to describe the expansive feeling of telling the story we carry in our bodies by sharing it with someone and finding a moment of mutuality. It's a wordplay inspired from the German work Kopfkino-which literally translates to 'head cinema.' It comes from the realization that the assault of the many thoughts and stories; happen in my body and not just in my head. The idea that the cinema we carry, is an embodied experience.

Taking it into the practice of decolonial filmmaking, I engage in the creation of scenes, encounters, moments and interaction that give the individuals engaging in it an opportunity to create and experience *Köperkino*- that is to embody a story that they relate in someone else. Some of the traits of these process are as follows:

3.3.2 The Meaning Making Dome

I have been, also musing on the 'shared imaginary space' created that enables these exchanges and also the peculiarities of this space that makes it intrinsic to only a collaborative practice. In my observation, there are primarily two such discerning spaces of shared meaning-making molded in these processes that are worth shedding light on.

1. The shared space between the filmmaker (me) and my collaborators.
2. The shared space between the audience experiencing the filmic work and the film (thereby the authors of the film)

It is in this imagined shared space of meaning-making where ideation, dialogue, debates occur before, during and after the production between me and my collaborators. An important characteristic of this space is that there is mutual acknowledgment and awareness of such a *liminal* space.

Drawing from Santos's idea of "ecology of knowledge" (Santos, 2005 and 2010), this space entails the "ecology of mutual understanding" constructed by compassionate response

to each other's sensibilities. I imagine it to be a dome covering us that we are inflating and expanding it with the airs of our collective ideas, curiosities, enthusiasm, excitement which are in turn also the building blocks of this space. By becoming aware and recognising our mutual boundaries, we create a permeable wall made of trust, care and comfort through which the osmosis of ideas occurs.

3.3.3 The Audience As Part Of The Meaning Making Dome

We (me and my protagonists) collectively dream the life form of the film and second-guess the imagined audience's response and thereby position ourselves and our expressions in relation to it. Here we come to imagine the *affect* and emergent properties that such a constructed fringe reality will have on the minds of the audience. A strong focus is put on acknowledging the power of the gaze of the audience. I believe the audience are in a privileged position being able to be in direct emotional contact with the vulnerabilities of the protagonists on the screen. It is important that me and my collaborators are very well aware of the intimacy that they are going to share with an audience that they have no prior knowledge of. Thus the awareness of the gaze of the audience makes my protagonists take further control of their self-representations and become more in-charge of the impact their self representations will have on the story and the film.

It's important that the audience is also made *felt* of the meaning making dome that has been constructed for them to explore, excavate and create their own meaning in the filmic experience. They should be able to question the limitations and expand the vocabulary of bodily variances by emotionally engaging with the lived experiences of the protagonists on the screen. It should open doors within them to find their own existential markers on the cartography of their lived selves. Thereby their engagement, critique and comments will nourish this ecology of mutual understanding. With their contributions, the meaning making dome will expand with the plurality of the many voices that it comes in contact with.

3.3.4 Creating A Fringe Reality: Performativity For Empowerment

Every filmic work, be it fictional, documentary or docufiction in narrative structure, relies on the construction of a reality within the film itself. I engage in active discussions with my protagonists about the reality effect (Nichols 1968:41) that many mainstream documentaries try to diffuse in the consciousness of people. Thereby my protagonist and I muse about appropriating such a construction of reality in our own filmic work, something I call the fringe reality.

This awareness makes way to the next discernment: the fact that the protagonists are going to perform a fictionalized version of themselves in this fringe reality we create together. Sometimes when my collaborators are experienced or trained performers, as in the case of the artists in Embodied Arts Teaser Video , their execution blurs the divide of performativity[3] and the performances. In the instance of Felix and other protagonists involved in "Liminality," the exploration of performativity becomes particularly intensive due to the narrative's close relation to their personal experiences and identities. In essence, the narrative is a reflection of their own stories. Hence, only through a collective agreement to construct such a marginal reality can we collaboratively fabricate the cinematic realm wherein this character will reside.

The awareness of such a performativity gives my protagonists a crucial detachment allowing contemplation on the traits of this constructed character in the film that will mirror their physical appearance. It further gives them space to express parts of themselves that they yearned to explore but were hindered by social inhibitions. Such an opportunity of self representation has potential to be a powerful act of self empowerment.

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[3] "Performativity" is a term entrenched in linguistic philosophy and has undergone extensive conceptual evolutions, largely attributed to the work of J.L. Austin and later, Judith Butler. Austin introduced the concept to elaborate how certain utterances, termed "performative," do not merely describe or report but actively perform actions. Judith Butler further nuanced this concept, particularly within the context of gender studies, proposing that gender is not an inherent or stable identity, but is instead constituted through repeated performative acts. These acts are not expressions of some prior reality but are constitutive of social realities and subjectivities. The concept of performativity interrogates the ways in which individuals navigate, resist, and reinforce normative frameworks through their actions, gestures, and speech, offering invaluable insights into the relational and contingent nature of identity formation and social existence.
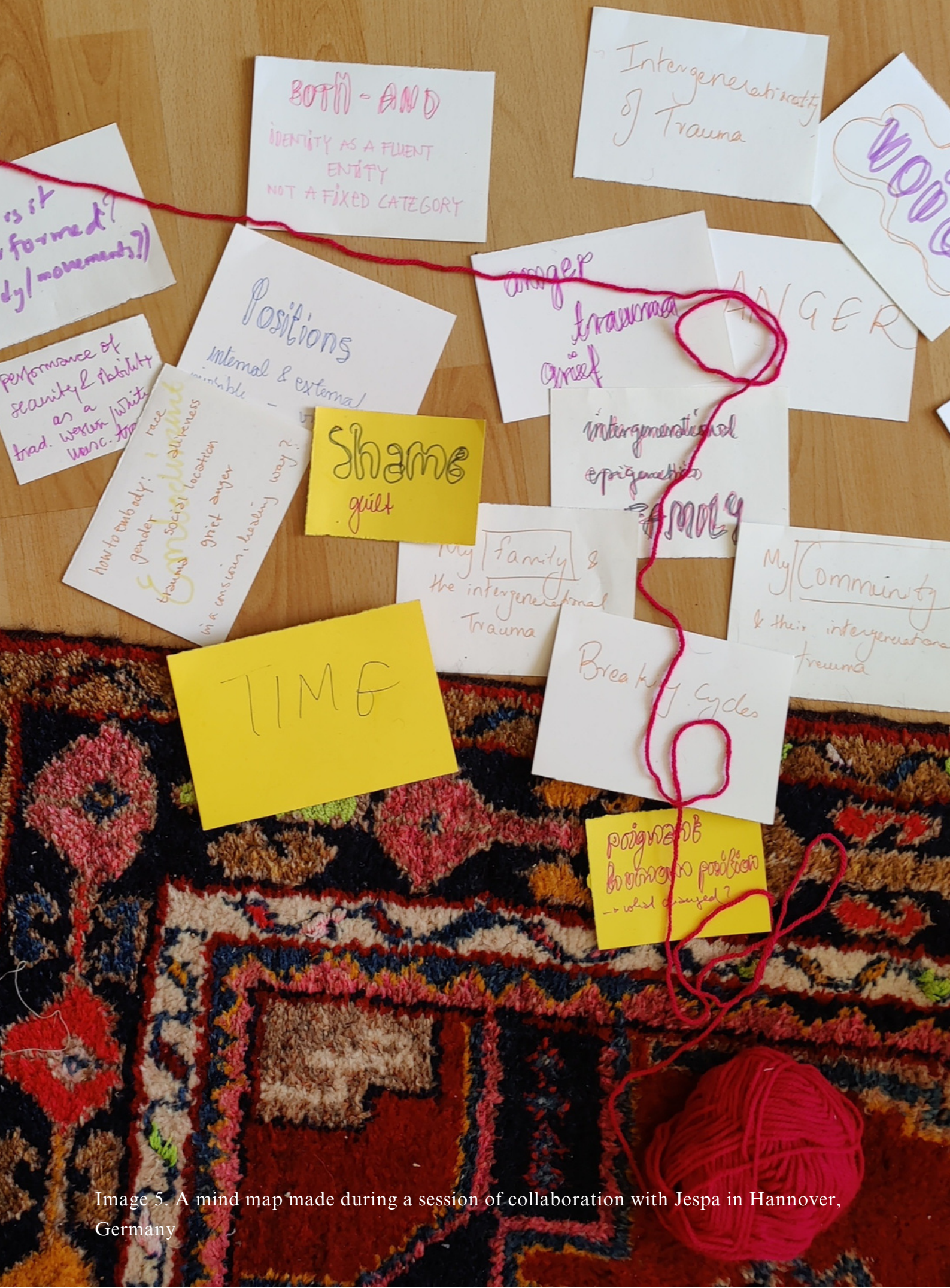
Image 5. A mind map made during a session of collaboration with Jespa in Hannover, Germany

4. Analysis & Main Insights

"In order to struggle to have a meaning, the oppressed must not in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both."— Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

4.1 Softening Othering

4.1.1 By Making Implicit Hierarchies More Explicit

Othering is a two way process. We all carry some technologies of *othering* in us based on the cultural upbringing and education we have received. Robert Sapolsky, a renowned endocrinologist, delves into the inherent human tendency to divide the world into in-groups (us) and out-groups (them), exploring the biological, psychological, and sociological mechanisms behind this division in his book Behave. He discusses how humans are predisposed to be wary of those who are different or unfamiliar and how this wariness can escalate to dehumanization and aggression under certain conditions. Humans have a natural inclination to favor members of their own group while being suspicious, fearful, or even hostile towards members of other groups. This bias is ingrained and can be triggered or intensified by various factors, including perceived threats, competition, and scarcity of resources. At the same time, when we scrutinize the multifaceted nature of in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, whereby individuals perceive members of out-groups as less than human, leading to a lack of empathy and an increase in aggressive behaviors towards them. For these predispositions to be overcome it'd important that we visibilise these inherent *othering* biases we carry in us.

When people from diverse lived experiences come together, as in my filmmaking practice, I embrace the presumption that the many modes of *othering* might possibly dictate the interpersonal subjectivity between us. Acknowledging these predispositions is not about accentuating discrimination but rather about fostering a shared understanding and mutual respect. It's about illuminating the shadows, uncovering the subtleties of our preconceived

notions, and deconstructing the entrenched ideologies that often govern our interactions. The point is to NOT ignore the differences we carry but to see it as an opportunity to understand the nuanced interplays and inherent biases that permeate our collective consciousness. By acknowledging it, we make it 'real'. And making it real, we gain control over these otherting narratives, hence giving us a fair chance to postulate ways to overcome it.

4.1.2 By arriving at a Shared goal

Working toward a shared goal can be a pivotal strategy in overcoming the barriers erected by *othering* and can foster an environment conducive to *perspective-taking*[4]. When individuals collaborate on a common objective, the inherent need for cooperation and mutual understanding can override the divisions and distinctions between "us" and "them". Decolonial filmmaking process allows a group of seemingly different individuals or communities to come together and work on a shared goal- here to collaborate on a film together. Right from the beginning there's an emphasis to foster a sense of common purpose and mutual interest in each other's life events. Such a shared goal necessitates understanding each others' viewpoints. A common goal can create a shared identity that supersedes individual differences and can dissolve the apparent dichotomy created by *othering*.

4.1.3 By focusing On Oral Histories

Many collaborators I work with—individuals often residing in societal margin, encounter numerous barriers when trying to access the vocabulary necessary to make their struggles, achievements, and triumphs acknowledged and validated by the larger public. This creates a persistent need for translators or storytellers who have been trained in the vocabulary of mass communication to convey these narratives. However, storytellers are not

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[4] Perspective-taking is an embodied process where an individual adopts another person's viewpoint. It is crucial for developing empathy, moral reasoning, and understanding of others' thoughts, feelings, and needs. However, while perspective-taking is undeniably important, it is crucial, as highlighted by scholars like Sara Ahmed in her work on the politics of emotions and the phenomenology of whiteness, to acknowledge and address the inherent power imbalances and structural inequalities that shape our perceptions, interactions, and experiences. Without critically engaging with these structures, perspective-taking risks perpetuating tokenistic or superficial understandings of 'the other.' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story," cautions against the misunderstanding and misrepresentations that arise when we only hear a single narrative about another person or country.

impartial, emotionless entities; they are holistic beings carrying prejudices and biases shaped by their cultural upbringings, which inevitably influence collaborative endeavors. When such inherent biases remain unexpressed and mutually unrecognized, genuine collaboration is elusive. If the process doesn't transform both the storyteller and the one who shares the story, the emerging collective narrative lacks any transformative power and falls into the risk of perpetuating stereotypical stories be it poverty porn or obsession with oppression.

Frequently, individuals in the margins share their embodied knowledge orally, amongst their peers as well as intergenerationally. Historically, access to academia and literature has been confined to specific groups, making the legitimacy of such knowledge and stories reliant on the storytellers versed in these recognized modes of knowledge production. The practice of decolonial filmmaking seeks to disrupt this othering paradigm by emphasizing the myriad of stories transmitted orally within individuals and communities. It places value on these narratives, recognizing their importance and the depth of understanding they bring, irrespective of their non-academic origins. This approach understands the necessity of bringing forth untold stories from the margins, allowing them to flourish in the collective consciousness, breaking the barriers erected by conventional, academically accepted forms of knowledge sharing. It ensures that the dialogue is not one-dimensional, dictated by the dominant groups, but is a multifaceted conversation that enriches our collective understanding of the nuances of human experiences.

The essence of real collaboration lies in the mutual transformation and growth of both the storyteller and the one who provides the story. It is a symbiotic relationship where learning is reciprocal, dismantling the traditional hierarchies between the 'knowledge holder' and the 'learner'. The intent is not just to share a story but to allow the process to challenge and reshape the perceptions and understandings of everyone involved, making the emerging story a beacon of collective wisdom and transformative power. Decolonial filmmaking thus becomes a tool to reframe and reclaim narratives, providing a platform for the marginalized voices to be heard and acknowledged in their authentic essence.

4.2 Intergenerational Pain and Privilege

4.2.1 Nothing goes away unless it's transformed

The predominant Western paradigm often exalts narratives of individualism. It promulgates the 'dream'—the notion that through sheer grit and resilience, anyone can overcome their impoverished conditions and/ or every disadvantage they face. Such a perspective is profoundly flawed, neglecting the intricate social fabric that constitutes an individual's being. It's crucial to consider the ramifications of this narrow viewpoint.

In my practice, an individual is the sum of the many parts they represent. They may be the offspring of a working-class family, nurtured by a single parent, with avenues to advanced education but devoid of a supportive milieu for mental well-being. An individual represents the many histories that the body bears and is the sum of the many stories that were passed on them. Their body carries the weight of these stories even if they are not directly accessible to them. These stories shape the way they interact with the world. An individual enjoying the comforts of social welfare, clean water, and education must recognize the historical cost at which these privileges were acquired. Many modern societies that relish these benefits have roots in the exploitation and subjugation of various communities globally. The conveniences of the modern individual are, unfortunately, constructed on the sufferings of numerous distressed populations.

Conversely, the anguish experienced by many marginalized communities emanates from historical pains bestowed upon them—slavery, the Holocaust, colonialist genocides are not isolated historical events. The repercussions of such atrocities trickle down generations. The enduring impacts don't simply vanish with erected borders or safeguarded wealth. They start to dissolve when we collectively confront the internalized violence embedded within us, paving the way for a commitment to prolonged transformative endeavors. Such a transformative process cannot be done in isolation. It is not up to the individual or a heterogeneous group of individuals to carry such a process. It requires the presence of many generations of communities, and individuals dwelling within the spectrum of pain and privilege, and engage in dialogues rooted in forgiveness and empowerment.

Hence to create any process of genuine metamorphosis be it healing or growth, an individual must confront their collective identity and their histories that they carry from generation to generation. Only through this collective reckoning can genuine transformation be actualized.

4.2.2 The dual nature of resilience

Resilience is fundamentally intertwined with cognitive and emotional flexibility, allowing individuals to adapt and shift coping strategies in accordance with varying circumstances. In a society filled with disparities and injustices, marginalized communities frequently experience disproportionate levels of stress arising from systemic *othering*. These stresses are often a byproduct of poverty, discrimination, lack of access to quality healthcare, education, and healthy living conditions, amongst other socio-economic constraints. Individuals within these communities often embody resilience to navigate through the multitude of adversities they encounter regularly. As we are often taught that it's only through resilience and grit can we get out of the grasps of a life in suffering.

However, such constant resilience—though seemingly positive—can have adverse repercussions on the body of an individual in what Arline T. Geronimus calls the weathering[5] effect. The incessant strain can lead to chronic health conditions, heightened vulnerability to diseases, and accelerated aging, ultimately reducing the life expectancy of individuals within these communities.

This underscores a paradox: while resilience is crucial for surviving and thriving amidst adversity, the very act of being resilient can impose a substantial toll on the well-being of those in marginalized communities, due to the relentless stress experienced in unjust societies.

4.2.3 Dehumanization as you rise up

W.E.B. Du Bois with the notion of "double consciousness[6]" posited that African Americans have to constantly balance their identity with the expectations and biases of a

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[5] Arline T. Geronimus, in her concept of "weathering," elucidates how persistent resilience in the face of relentless stress and adversity—especially in unjust societies—can have detrimental effects on the health of marginalized communities. In her book, the term "weathering" metaphorically represents the gradual wearing down of the body and mind due to continuous exposure to stressors, primarily stemming from systemic inequalities and socio-economic hardships. This cumulative stress and its biological repercussions are a manifestation of the "weathering" effect.

[6] Du Bois posits that African Americans develop a dual self-perception: one reflecting their true identity and heritage, and the other mirroring the hostile stereotypes and values imposed by a white-dominated society. This fragmented self-awareness forces individuals to constantly reconcile their internal sense of self with the external perceptions and expectations, creating an inherent tension and conflict in their consciousness. This phenomenon is not exclusive to African Americans but can be extrapolated to understand the experiences of other marginalized and subordinated groups living within hegemonic cultures.

predominantly white society. This dual awareness is a source of stress and tension as individuals navigate different social spaces, always having to prove their worth and humanity. The theory of intersectionality[7], primarily propounded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, helps us understand the multiplicative stresses faced by marginalized individuals. Those who exist at the intersections of various marginalized identities often experience compounded forms of discrimination and *othering*. As they ascend the socio-economic ladder, they must navigate spaces predominantly occupied by privileged groups and confront multifaceted forms of discrimination and stereotyping. Marginalized individuals who attain positions of power or enter prestigious fields often face the stress of tokenism. They are seen as the representatives of their entire community, which leads to increased pressure to succeed and 'prove' their worth and capability, exacerbated by the perpetual consciousness of being under the societal microscope. The pressure to assimilate into dominant cultures, while maintaining a connection to one's roots, is a prevalent stressor. The struggle between adapting to prevailing norms and staying true to one's identity and background often results in a conflict between authenticity and acceptance. At the same time, Imposter Syndrome is common among people from marginalized communities who achieve success in traditionally exclusive spaces. The constant fear of being exposed as a "fraud," despite evident success and competence, is a manifestation of the internalized inferiority and *othering* that is prevalent in hierarchized societal structures.

The role of such stresses does not disappear with the lifetime of the individual. In "When the Body Says No," Gabor Maté explores the intricate interplay between mind and body health, emphasizing the profound impacts of intergenerational trauma[8], a phenomenon where the traumatic experiences of one generation affect the subsequent ones.

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[7] Intersectionality is a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. This concept is a theoretical framework for understanding how various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, gender, and other socio-cultural categories, intersect and overlap, creating complex systems of discrimination or privilege. It posits that these interlocking identity categories contribute to specific forms of oppression and discrimination experienced by individuals, which cannot be examined in isolation as they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In the context of this work, intersectional thought is crucial for exploring multifaceted identities and addressing the unique experiences and struggles of individuals who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized groups.

[8] Intergenerational trauma is particularly significant as it doesn't just result in emotional and psychological disturbances in descendants but can also manifest in a variety of physical illnesses. Maté presents a correlation between suppressed emotions and increased vulnerability to diseases, implying that unresolved traumas and unexpressed emotions can lead to weakened immune systems and heightened susceptibility to chronic conditions. This underscores the importance of acknowledging and resolving past traumas to break the vicious cycle and foster healthier future generations. The holistic approach to healing proposed by Maté involves understanding the interconnectedness of emotional and physical health.

Individually, we are in dire need for holistic approaches to understand the interconnectedness of the individual, their family and communities to address the effects of stress and trauma to achieve sustainable well-being. Collectively, we need to reevaluate resilience within the context of systemic inequality and a call for comprehensive societal reforms to alleviate the burdens shouldered by marginalized populations.

4.3 Decolonial filmmaking

4.3.1 The role of Tenderness And Humor

In his influential book, "Man's Search for Meaning" (1946), Viktor Frankl talks about humour as a crucial tool for the soul to protect itself. He highlights how humour, more than any other human trait, can give us the ability to step back and rise above any situation, providing a momentary escape, even if it's just for a few seconds.

Many of my collaborators that I work with carry embodied memories of extreme stresses, be it a traumatic event in the past or everyday discriminatory violence. When working with bodies who carry the unsolved burdens, I have noticed the indispensable role of tenderness in my process. When individuals are entangled with unhealed wounds, the approach necessitates a soft touch, a genuine and thoughtful concern. It's about creating a space where their voices can emerge from the darker caves within themselves, in a controlled and safe environment. Where their stories can unfold without the fear of judgment or further harm and can be completely validated for as is.

While creating artistic practices designed to foster breaking cycles of intergenerational pain, finding solace dealing with the stresses of othering; tenderness isn't just a tool; it's an ethos, a philosophy that guides every interaction, every dialogue. It's a proactive choice to approach every story, every memory with compassion and openness. It's the acknowledgment of the silent pains and muted cries, the unshed tears and unspoken words,. Tenderness seeks to understand the unsaid, to hear the whispers of the unvoiced, to see the invisible scars.

In essence, weaving tenderness into the process is not just about understanding the embodied memories of trauma but about acknowledging them, respecting them, giving them

the space to breathe and to exist. It's about building a foundation of mutual respect and empathy, allowing each individual to navigate their journey at their own pace, in their own way, while feeling seen, heard, and valued.

4.3.2 The importance of non-conformity, the importance to adapt

Embodied -perception, -imagination, -expression, -communication, -memories, -traumas, and -trust form the foundation of decolonial filmmaking work, grounding it in a tangible and reflexive practice. It is a meticulous investigation on the profound effects of *othering* matrices embedded within individuals, communities and the stories we carry and embody. The practice of decolonial filmmaking is steeped in imagination, allowing practitioners to rethink and redefine roles and responsibilities around collaborative endeavors. It is not merely about creating a film, a story or some content; it is about questioning the essence of the content and the processes that bring it to life: "Can it be done differently? Why am I doing this? For whom am I doing this?" These questions are instrumental in forging a path of critical reflection and conscious creation.

Decolonial filmmaking by its essence is a long-term process; it requires the building of relationships grounded in mutual respect, understanding, and shared visions of hope and respect. It is a practice that involves continuous learning, unlearning, relearning, an ongoing engagement with the many shadows within ourselves and the many dark stories of our histories. However, decolonial filmmaking demands a relentless battle against the status quo, a continuous effort to navigate and challenge established norms and practices. This path is often challenging and exhausting, but it is a necessary endeavor for those willing to embrace transformative change and build equitable relationships.

The question that remains is, "Do you want to do it?"

Image 6. Preview Poster for the Film and Artistic Project Körperkino currently in development

5. LINKING BACK TO CIRCE

"In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins - not through strength, but through persistence." – Buddha

5.1 The role of the culture and creative economies in the crises of today and tomorrow

Teresa Koloma Beck, in her welcome speech for CIRCE fellows in San Sebastian, articulated an inspiring reflection, declaring that we are navigating a peculiar juncture in history, a point where individuals and communities, abundant with diverse experiences, are moving, meeting and interacting and intermingling. Conflicts, she posited, are the natural progeny of such a juxtaposition.

I resonate deeply with this sentiment, perceiving our era as unprecedentedly unique, a time when people hailing from a variety of backgrounds can migrate oceans and immerse themselves in narratives vastly different from their own. As the fabric of European societies become increasingly interwoven with the threads of diasporic communities and migrants harmonizing with the local populace, sentiments of '*othering*' are naturally going to deepen their roots.

Steven Weinberg said: ''We all bear conflicting needs within us. We want both, simplicity and abundance.'' Such persistence is pertinent in our multicultural dialogue where polarizing narratives pervade, propagating hate and catalyzing violence. Amidst this cultural tumult, media outlets disseminate narratives, often tacky and transient, their relevance adjudged by the prevailing cultural winds.

In an era marked by industries capitalizing on the attention economy, a major challenge emerges for cultural and creative economies: the onus to encapsulate the multifaceted complexities of our collective stories. CCE must ponder on how our collective consciousness can transcend superficial understandings and embrace the multiplicity of stories we harbor, acting as a reservoir of shared humanity and mutual respect. It presents a distinctive challenge in an environment of cancel culture, when faced with seemingly

contrasting or challenging perspectives, dominant communities often opt for the simpler path of dismissing or ostracizing those who question or contradict their worldview. Hence the CCE are left to answer an important question: How do we create, accommodate and nourish narratives that celebrate the ambiguities and paradoxical state of our collective consciousness?

5.2 The future of culture and creative economies and policy implications in Europe

James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." In this environment, laden with cultural pluralism, it is essential to scrutinize how cultural narratives are constructed, received, and perpetuated, and how they can be rendered as vehicles of unity rather than division. At the same time, it's also vital to not fall for simplistic unison narratives that potentially remove the edges of singularities of our lived experiences. While it's important to give space and agency to marginalized, indigenous narratives, it is also important to position it next to each other so that they can interact with each other, hence fostering meaningful discourse, dialogue and debates.

No community or identity polity can sustain in isolation. The onus to harbor plurality falls on the CCE to carve spaces in the public consciousness for narratives from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds. For this, it's vital to empower bodies and communities to take agency of their own narratives and accommodate positions of power to claim authority over how it's presented and represented. It is also vital for the existing structures of cultural production to pave ways for decolonial collaboration with its roots on long-term, transformative and just processes.

Theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) can play a pivotal role in dissecting and understanding the complex of how various forms of social stratification, such as race, class, and gender, do not operate independently but interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. By incorporating a nuanced understanding of intersectionality and engaging with diverse narratives responsibly, cultural and creative economies have the opportunity to hold the many complexities of our collective consciousness.

The future belongs to policy implications that foster Embodied Imagination, Encourage Intersectional Approaches, Empower Marginalized Voices, Support Decolonial Collaboration and Enhance Education with Decolonial thought. We might need plenty of programmes like CIRCE that provides opportunities for storytellers crafting tales upon the legacies of ancestors, forging paths for future giants to stand upon and peek into the horizon of an egalitarian tomorrow.

Image 7. Video Still from the work in progress cut of Liminality Chapter 1

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