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## **Shooting the elephant in the (prayer) room**

### **Politics of Moods, racial hauntologies, and idiomatic diffraction**

By Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen & Dorte Staunæs

#### **Abstract**

“The elephant in the room” is an idiom that summarises a particular way of handling social and cultural problems. Elephants in rooms are social taboos that are affectively charged: even though everybody knows the elephant is there, they ignore it. In this paper, we grapple with disappearance acts related to race and racialisation in a white-dominated Danish context, the university. Race is, we argue, simultaneously there and not there: a ghostly matter that haunts organisational policies and practices which are preoccupied with governing diversity. Using a debate over ‘prayer rooms’ in educational institutions, we aim at building a methodology that is sensitive to the issues of race and racialisation in Northern European contexts, which are dominated by a particular kind of “innocent” whiteness (Wekker, 2016). We turn to, but also twist, the methodology of diffraction, because diffraction concerns things which disappear but continue to haunt. We use the idiom “the elephant in the room” and the position of elephants in colonial archives as our diffractive devices in order to foreground race and racialisation. Therefore, we name this methodology idiomatic diffraction. This twist towards the idiom is helpful in investigating how, more precisely, racial relations materialise in and haunt affectively both in universities and in Denmark as a whole.

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In this chapter, we consider methodologies that will help us explore racial hauntologies, that is, how race and racialisation emerge as ghostly matters in diversity politics and management conducted in higher education. It may sound odd to argue that issues of race and racialisation

appear as ghostly matters that seemingly disappear but come back to haunt you. However, in Denmark, on the top of the European continent, a strange form of "white innocence" (Wekker, 2016), dominates. Questions of race continually seems to disappear, only to return as matters that generate loud and affective engagements. Racial ontologies are simultaneously there and not there when diversity is governed in Denmark, including the field of higher education.

We focus on the spectre(s) of whiteness as the(se) spectre(s) re-turn(s) in higher education. We argue that race is not only relational, but also affective and therefore fleeting as well as manifest. Like other organisations, universities in Denmark are formed as white spaces. These spaces fold comfortably around embodied Danish whiteness. In this environment, whiteness is not something the white body needs to face, since it "trails behind like the tail of a comet" (Merleau-Ponty in Ahmed, 2007, p. 156). Non-white bodies, on the other hand, become "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004), who continually have to face the whiteness of the institution.

In Jacques Derrida's (1994) well-known play on the words "ontology" and "haunting", hauntology concerns the specters of communism that, according to Marx, haunt Europe. But as Derrida points out (using the spectre of Hamlet's father as his point of departure), haunting is a feature of the structure of any hegemony. In this chapter, we seek to capture the haunting, affective structure of hegemonic whiteness. Thus, we ask: How can we *methodologically* approach the hauntology of race, and "in the mode of a justice-to-come" (again following Derrida) get a grip on the affective circulation of race at Danish universities. This approach needs to be sensitive to the fact that race and racialisation are central, *not* epiphenomenal, since, as Sylvia Wynter argues, "the human" is a genre whose formation was historically bound to racialisation through "Man's Project", which "has provided the global conditions of existence, without being able to realize a universality able to go beyond the limits of its own ethno-class, biohumanist, and therefore liberal modality of universalism" (2006, p.

163). The ontology that “Man’s project” establishes is full of holes and absences. In the architecture of that project, there are elephants in rooms, as the idiom goes. “The elephant in the room” concerns social taboos that are affectively charged: even though everybody knows the elephant is there, they ignore it or even try to *make* it disappear.

Leaning on Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, we turn to the methodology of diffraction, because it implies a sensitivity towards that which disappears but keeps on haunting. However, we twist this methodology: we use the idiom “the elephant in the room” and the position of elephants in colonial archives as our diffractive devices in order to foreground race and racialisation. As a result, we name this methodology *idiomatic diffraction*. The twisting helps us investigate how, more precisely, racial relations materialise in and affectively haunt universities and Denmark today.

We have worked toward idiomatic diffraction through three trajectories: The *first* is empirical<sup>1</sup>, focused on a debate in Denmark during in 2017 over what were called “prayer rooms” at educational institutions, and the proposed state ban against these spaces. We pay particular attention to the reply from the rector of the University of Copenhagen, in which he stated that this debate (and the ban) was an attempt to regulate matters that were irrelevant and fleeting by using what he called “mood politics”<sup>2</sup>. This debate, which started with a visit by a member of the Danish parliament to the “prayer room” at the university of Copenhagen, is a cut, we argue, into a (racialised) difference that makes a difference in Danish higher education; or in other words, the controversy began when the comfortable homeliness of the university became *unheimlich* for the politicians.

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical material consists of articles from Danish newspapers published between 1 February and 31 March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Mood appears in two ways in this chapter: *First* as an empirical term, as it is used by the rector. *Second* as a theoretical term signifying affective atmospheres. Sara Ahmed (2014) develops her conceptualisation of mood from Heidegger’s writing on *Stimmung*, but it can also be related to Raymond Williams’ (1977) conceptualisation of “structures of feeling”. These conceptualisations are debateable and can be elaborated, see for instance Galal & Hvenegård-Lassen, 2020, chapter 5.

Our *second* trajectory draws sustenance from work within recent feminist new materialism on affect and materiality. Paying attention to affect helps us to focus on ephemerality, intensity and flows of moods. This can be done by employing Haraway and Barad's rearticulations of diffraction that, rather than focusing on representation or reflection, are capable of grasping how a phenomenon can be bent and splintered in order to re-configure. As we return to below, Barad, in particular, also uses Derrida's notion of hauntology. This provides us with a language to describe how something which is absent haunts something which is present.

The *third* trajectory takes its cue from postcolonial literature. When Colson Whitehead (2016) wrote a novel materialising the historical escape route the *Underground Railroad*<sup>3</sup> into an actual railroad hidden beneath the ground in unseen "black holes", he was also voicing a critique of contemporary race relations in the United States. We endeavor, in what follows, to move along a similar narrative track by materialising the idiom of 'an elephant in the room' within the halls of a Danish university. Governing the presence of elephants is what is attempted in George Orwell's essay *Shooting an elephant* (1936/2003), which is about how elephants might be awakened and how they affectively return "by the apparition of a specter" (Derrida, 1994, p. 4) after being shot.

Reading diffractively is about tracing and affirming tendencies and movements in empirical material as that material is broken apart and cut together. What ghostly matter appears, when diversity work, as it plays out in the prayer room controversy, is read diffractively through the novel and the idiom?

Our conceptual apparatus emphasises simultaneity and non-linearity and enables us to move forwards and backwards in space and time as we proceed with our narrative. Thus,

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<sup>3</sup> The Underground Railroad refers to a network of routes, safe houses and individuals that helped African-American in the Southern states to escape from enslavement from the early nineteenth century onwards.

we begin at the university in the early twenty-first century, where we expand on the prayer-room controversy. From there, our diffractive readings move back and forth in time and space, making regular visits to the location that we call the research laboratory along the way.

### **Early twenty-first century/the university and the room of retreat**

Danish universities are public institutions funded by the taxpayer, and are required to account for their policies and practises related to gender equality at regular intervals. To a lesser extent, they are also required to focus on issues relating disability and harassment. Race (or ethnicity or religion for that matter) has not figured in many attempts at managing diversity. Establishing “prayer-rooms” has been among the few practical – and not particularly noisy - acknowledgements of diversity in Danish universities.

Or at least it did not become noisy until a roar in 2016. During that year and into 2017, the Danish parliament debated whether or not they wished to issue a state ban on prayer rooms. The contribution to this debate in which we are particularly interested occurred after a visit at the University of Copenhagen by a member of the parliament. She found what *she* named a “prayer room”. The room in question was actually called a “retreat room” by the university, and described as a space for silence, prayer and meditation. The politician declared that this room was not a retreat but rather in the frontline of a battle, and she received support from other politicians. While the room itself contained the holy scriptures of the monotheistic religions, blankets, pillows and candles, no other religious or political markers were present. But the politician had found some Hizb-ut-Tahrir flyers in the corridor near the room. This became the basis for loud arguments for a ban on these types of spaces across educational institutions: they would foster Islamism, and they would be used by radicalised Muslim students to control female students, the politicians argued.

The rector said that banning prayer-rooms was an example of what he called “mood politics”. To him mood politics signified a misguided governance directed towards

ephemeral micro-details, as opposed to the much more important long-term macro-problematics concerning for instance the ability of Denmark to enter into the global competition with other states. He argued that prayer rooms were not about anyone in particular (Muslims, for instance), but were spaces dedicated to praying, resting, meditation or silence that could be used by the university population. He regards these spaces as hybrid and multiple – and accordingly universal rather than particular. They are not related to differences that make a difference.

### **The early twenty-first century/the research laboratory**

Following Foucault's use of the term "point of diffraction" for the site at which a discourse includes interference, as well as association (Foucault, 1982), as well as Haraway's coupling of diffraction with Min-ha's concept of the "in/appropriated Other" (1992), the idea of diffraction, gained remarkable currency with Karen Barad's further development of the concept and her coupling of it to Derrida's concept of hauntology. Diffraction is well described in quantum physics, as well as being re-defined in queer-feminist and new materialism circles. Barad (2014) writes that the word diffraction can be rolled back through several different genealogies. Her own work is based in the field of physics (in particular Grimaldi, Young and Niels Bohr) and then proceeds by way of feminist studies, especially the work of Haraway and postcolonial feminists such as Minh-Ha (1986/87) and Anzaldúa (1987) on rethinking relationality and exploring differences as a difference within.

Diffraction means bending or inflection. As Barad points out, diffraction can be understood both as a phenomenon and as a methodology. The word "diffraction" derives from the Latin *dif-frangere*, meaning to break (*frangere*) apart (*dis*), that is, to snap or break something into pieces. Barad states, "There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new" (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Nothing new has been added, but there still seems to be something new in the diffraction. Thus diffraction means to snap or break in pieces such that the fragments

transform themselves into a chain of new configurations. Diffraction is thereby a ‘wave-cut’ with effects in space, time, matter and, as we will stress, *energy*. Barad emphasizes that diffraction is not about every single difference, but about the differences that make a difference. This also includes the differences that seem to disappear but keep on haunting. In order to underline the haunting quality of the differences that racialisation makes, we argue for particular attention should be paid to the energetic effects of diffraction and thereby to the affective intensities that raise and fall when something is cut-together-apart.

It is at this point that we turn to mood and to “the elephant in the room”; to an idiom, a figure of speech, that encapsulates time, space and energy. The idiom underscores the fleeting and intense affective energy generated in time and space. At first glance, the idiom might be seen as a representation—albeit a representation of absence, of that which cannot be represented. However, it seems more fruitful to bind this idiom to the level of (affective) energy and to the concept of mood. The elephant in the room appears as a structure of feeling (Williams, 1997); this massive yet intangible beast condenses a collective mood that frames and surrounds, tones and filters into what is taking place in the room. People sense and feel that the elephant is there. It has to do with uncanniness and discomfort; it is *unheimlich* (Freud, 2003), and involves the haunting of indeterminacy (Derrida, 1994). We consider elephants in the room to be moods resulting from social taboos with high affective charge that might if subjected to prying eyes, even be explosive. The latter must be avoided at all costs, perhaps even guarded against and anticipated. This element of anticipation renders the elephant in the room into a figure in time: it reaches out for the virtual (what might happen) and tries to tame it here and now. Everybody notices that it is there, the awkward and sometimes painful atmosphere, but bodies are affected in different ways and some bodies are allowed almost to ignore it.



Referring to Ahmed (2014), we should like to add that the diversity work we perform on an everyday basis is mood work. Ahmed describes the bodily experience of entering a room as the racial other, the non-white, who is both the one expected to take on diversity work and the one who must adjust to the prevailing mood. For whiteness—that has the upper hand—the atmosphere also becomes uncomfortable and awkward. Refusal, resistance, avoidance and evasion follow: perhaps to avoid painful feelings of embarrassment, or to prevent oneself or anyone else from feeling uncomfortable. Although as white women we could let this issue pass unremarked, we are attempting to respond to it rather than investing our energy in the hard work required to look past race and racialisation (Swan, 2010). We rely on the structure of feeling that we notice by way of our own bodily and historical embeddedness. Equally, we rely on our theoretical concepts and the landscapes of research informed by history. The elephant is there and is not there. It can be felt—clearly by some, hardly at all by others. It passes unnoticed by some, cannot be missed by others.

### **Early twentieth century/the colonised world**

The colonial archive is teeming with elephants. In European images of empire and colonial fantasies, the elephant is a permanent fixture. From the early twentieth century onwards, children have been introduced to the delights of (the French) empire in the stories of Babar, the baby elephant (the original story was published in 1931) and in Kipling's story of "The Elephant's Child, or How the Elephant got his Trunk" (published in 1902).

Less conspicuously but clearly enough, elephants accompany imperial melancholy in the books of Agatha Christie and E. M. Forster. In the Danish setting, the elephant stands out as an emblem in the imposing Elephant Gate of the Carlsberg property in Copenhagen, and on a physically less imposing scale in the Danish chivalric honor of the Order of the Elephant. The elephant is thus a recurring theme in European representations of empire.

And when the elephant moves into the room, this particular legacy binds itself to the taboo: to that which must be avoided or got around.

In this sense, it is not so odd to diffract the white university's prayer room with colonial stories of elephants. Or in other words, to place the elephant in the prayer room. We argue, then, that through the elephant, the idiom can be tied to colonialism, and that through this tie we can see the idiom stretching between the anticipation of the potential—what could happen—and the past, which, as it were, sets the anticipatory tone. As a rule, the methodology of diffraction highlights the processes through which differences are going to make a difference. The idiom of the elephant, through its connection to the colonial legacy and in combination with the methodology of diffraction, enforces a 'doubled-up' awareness of the differences that make up racial difference.

In his 1936 essay *Shooting an Elephant*, Orwell recounts an episode that took place while the narrator was working for the Indian imperial police in Burma. Called out to deal with a domesticated elephant that had run amok, and armed with his rifle, the narrator heads for the poor part of town to find out what the elephant is up to. Suspecting at first that a hoax is being played on him, he discovers that the elephant has trampled a person to death. With some hesitation, he takes his rifle, which is not really suited to elephant shooting, and sets out with a large accompanying crowd on an elephant hunt. He finds the elephant quietly standing still and grazing, like a calm and sleepy cow. What now? Should he shoot, or not shoot? Propelled by the crowd's expectation that there will be an execution, and very much against his will, he shoots the elephant.

Orwell's essay is the elephant we insert in the prayer room. We use this story to launch our argument—not in order to use the racialised structures of feeling that the essay describes as a *reflection* of the prayer-room debate or the rector's handling of it, but on the contrary because it holds the possibility of diffraction. If we read episodes that occur in the

Danish welfare context *diffractively* through the essay, what are the elements that come into view? What is re-assembled here?

### **Early twenty-first century /the room of retreat**

The room of retreat is just one among hundreds of rooms. A tiny room, a cell in the big university put there for people to take a break, a contemplative time out in the day. But the room seems to have become a disturbance. Initially designated as a place of quiet, the room of retreat is mutating into a noisy room, an alarming room. Something has been materialised in the room. In no way is it a refuge, but instead, it becomes a terrain where the elephant tramples and trumpets around: an ordeal for the rector, as it was for the narrator in Orwell's essay.

The university's economy has been a concern for state regulation for some time. But with the prayer-room debate, it becomes apparent that the university's buildings and architecture can also be included as an issue of concern from the state. The campus—which originally meant “open space” - may be subject to detailed national political control: not through decisions by the university's management, employees and students, but by the state and through prohibitions. The university's autonomy is under attack, and has been so for some time.

Educational institutions, primary and secondary school above all, have long been at the heart of policies aiming to form the nation's future citizens in a particular mould. As an organisation the university was traditionally seen as independent and autonomous—in the Middle Ages, the university even had its own courts and prisons. Recent decades, however, have been marked by ever-increasing intervention in internal university affairs, which looks very much like an attempt to make the university into a government-dominated corporation. Despite demands for the university to become increasingly international, there is a widespread tendency to regard the university as a national concern, a sort of extended arm of the competition state (see also the chapter by Brøgger in this volume). The rector's contribution

bore the hallmarks of this approach: this was simply the environment within which he had to navigate. But something else also came into view: denial, shutdown.

The recasting of the room as a *prayer* room that must be prohibited underlines that the university has become a national concern: a *Danish* educational institution— in the first instance, to protect female students from others taking over their prayer practice, a step taken by white people against brown men (Spivak, 1998). In an instant, the protection of these female students has become a question on defending the nation's wellbeing (Puar, 2007). The room of retreat has become an affectively charged threat to a larger whole. The room can no longer serve as a refuge for the minority because its existence is now cast as tantamount to a threat to the majority of the population.

The threat, then, is perceived to originate from minorities whose physical features (their skin or hair colour) and clothing are read as signifying stories of migration and flight from North Africa, the Middle East and of Islamic affiliation. But should we – in particular because our empirical case is about prayer rooms – make a distinction between religion and race? We argue that Muslim populations in Europe are subjected to racialisation – and that race and religion (and gender) intersect at this point. When the move is made directly from Islam as a religion to Muslims, and when to the category “Muslim” is added a series of practices, this is more accurately described as the racialisation of Muslims than as Islamophobia alone (Meer, 2013). In a Danish context, it is “Muslim” that is contrasted with “Danish”, rather than “Islam” with “Christianity”, even if “Muslim” of course alludes to “Islam”, even as “Danish” alludes to Christianity.

Paradoxically, the nationalizing (and along with it, if at a lower volume, the re-Christianising) of the university is taking place even as it is taken for granted that it must behave like a large international corporation that has to compete in a world characterised by diversity. This is the macro-politics with which the rector is so keen to align himself. He does diversity

work through mood work and tries to turn down the noise by saying that the room is for everyone. But the university's territory - the room of retreat and all the other rooms - is haunted by (the specters of) racial relations. It is already occupied and inhabited in a particular racialised way. Here, in the shadow of this intra-action, is the irony: rather than the students who used the room of retreat becoming radicalised, it is whiteness that emerges as radicalised. A whiteness that is not prepared to exist alongside the Other or even include it. But nobody is talking about whiteness or Christianity. What is said out loud is that the problem is Islam, and perhaps Muslim men in particular.

Elephants never forget, as the saying goes. But the colonisers' heirs mostly suffer from amnesia with regard to the colonial legacy and the racial structures that shaped and continue to shape our world (Hall, 2000). However, more and more work is required to erase, to forget, to ignore the privileges of whiteness. Like Wekker (2016), we wonder how a nation that was an imperial power for four hundred years can envision a present free from the traces of racial structures, and how the same nation can represent itself as a victim rather than a perpetrator in the context of recent migration. Globalisation and internationalisation are viewed as happening now, not as the premise of modernity, and as part of "Man's project" (Wynter, 2006). The university, understood as the framework of institutionalised scholarship, is thus—despite its increasingly hollow self-government—interwoven with Christian tradition and colonial, imperial power, which is intertwined with new public management and the emphasis on national interests. When reading this episode diffractively through Orwell's *Shooting an elephant*, we dive deep into the black holes. Seen from this perspective, there is something in the rector's intervention that reaches far beyond him and transcends innocence, oversight and ignorance.

## Early twentieth-century/colonised Burma

Orwell's essay points to what provokes the elephant in the room, and what happens when it leaves the room. In a number of ways, the essay anticipates a later postcolonial writings. There is a particular resonance with Bhabha's (2004) interpretation of colonial power and authority. Bhabha emphasizes the ambivalence of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, which for the coloniser it is shot through with uneasiness and anxiety. Orwell's narrator encounters hatred, bitterness and insults in the colonised Burma, which get very much under his skin (Orwell, 2003, p. 31). Despite his own critique of the empire, the narrator realizes how he "was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible" (ibid, p. 31). Orwell's narrator thus does not manage to grasp the feelings of the colonised population so as to become a part of them: he cannot escape the position of the coloniser. The mood that draws him in in the elephant incident affects him. Thus he is caught in an affective tension of which he is forced -uneasy and reluctant as he is - to take charge. And in the moment he realises that he has no choice but to shoot the elephant, he grasps:

. . . The hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of an unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor in the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. [. . . ] A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing — no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

(ibid, pp.  
36–37)

What is it that keeps on haunting Orwell's narrator? It is the elephant in the room: the racial relation of his whiteness, and the colonial position of power that whiteness attaches itself to. In this racialised structure of feelings, he cannot escape his position. It is the affective and collective atmosphere that traps him and drives him to do what he is reluctant to do. The elephant in the story is not the source of his feelings, but it intensifies the situation and its affective quality: it is an imperial half-object that radiates the uneasiness and anxiety that bind coloniser to colonised. Orwell calls this episode a little incident, but one that gives a decisive glimpse of "the real nature of imperialism - the real motives for which despotic governments act" (2003, p. 32). Yet it is precisely this episode that pushes him into a place where the holes in the ontology he lives by press upon him. It grimaces at him, it shoves his own position in the structure of empire into the foreground. It makes him into the 'sahib' he does not want to be, but at the same time cannot help being. And all the while, there is the worst threat of all: he will (perhaps) look ridiculous. The elephant must be shot.

### **Early twenty-first century/ the postcolonial welfare context**

The prayer-room controversy was just one in a series of debates on legislation and state prohibitions targeting particular articles of clothing, religious practices, residential areas and child-rearing practices which, despite increasingly forced attempts to formulate directives and prohibitions in universal terms, targeted particular ethnic and religious minorities in Denmark. In the debate on prayer room *the politicians* pick up the atmosphere of anxiety and sent it out into circulation. They demanded that the university should be transformed into a nationally controlled and cleansed sanctuary for white people; that a place of retreat must be transformed into a place where white innocence can be lived out without being disturbed by the noise

leaking out of the prayer room. They were happy to shoot the elephant without a second thoughts. Then the question of racialisation and racialised privilege would no longer be there. And if and when a room of retreat turns up somewhere else, at another institution, for instance, they are not the ones who will look ridiculous.

It is the rector who takes the role of the sahib who has to defend the order - and who also has to do something more. He tries to come up with a solution like King Solomon: the room is for everyone, he says. In so doing, he is urging the elephant back into the room: let it graze in there peacefully now. But the door is open just far enough to make this move impossible: the elephant cannot simply be ignored, it must simultaneously be meta-communicated and minimized; and in addition, the fleeting issues and micro-details must be presented as unimportant, as something that obscures what really matters.

Like Orwell's narrator, though in a rather different way, the rector attempts to govern the mood. It is at this very point, in trying to keep the mood sweet by overlooking the differences that make a difference, that he takes control and that (mood) politics comes into play. Diffracted through the elephant (the idiom as well as Orwell's essay) the rector's intervention re-forms itself into a sort of inverse diversity measure, which preserves uniformity by denying differences - as opposed to diversity work that seeks to transform institutions by opening them up to others than those for whom they were originally built (Ahmed, 2017).

Like Orwell's narrator, the rector cannot escape his situation. The intervention cannot be ascribed primarily to him as an individual. It is a consequence of the structure he has to deal with; the conditions under which he has to govern. The intervention is not extremist. In no way does the rector suggest that the presence of Muslims in the room of retreat is a threat to the university. On the face of it, in fact, the intervention is intended to keep that kind of extremism strictly under control. Paradoxically, however, the rector cannot contain the situation, because his mood politics allows the continuation of majoritisation and implies a



denial that anything special could also be at stake here - particular needs, particular uses for this room. The rector hides behind the plea of universalism. Perhaps this is because he foresees a(n) (even) bad (worse) mood if the elephant slips through the chink of the open door - a mood that will have material effects in the form of reduced grant funding and cancelled goodwill among the country's ruling political parties. That really would make him look ridiculous.

In the prayer-room case, whiteness performs three disappearing acts all at once. First, the origin setting the framework evaporates; then the non-white, racialised Otherness disappears from view; and finally, just as the Christian origin disappears, the religion of the Other (Islam) steps forward. Three very potent relations become fleeting and are passed over in both speech and action. But for all that, they are very much present, just like the elephant in the room.

In many ways, erasing differences is in many ways an honored Scandinavian management strategy. We must be equal; therefore we must also be the same. This is an ontology full of holes. If we splinter and re-assemble the rector's contribution by applying the idiom of the elephant in the room, racialised difference disappear and reappear. There is nothing new, but there are new configurations that break out in new kinds of effects which bring new consequences. Everyone senses the presence of the accompanying and trumpeting elephant - but different bodies notice it in different ways.

### **The twenty-first century/the research laboratory**

Our ambition has been to develop a methodology, a way of getting a grip on something that is hard to grasp, namely racialisation and in particular whiteness as ephemeral (for some) at the university. Idiomatic diffraction opens up the empirical case of the prayer-room debate and casts patterns of interference that allow us to investigate light waves even in the shadows (Barad, 2010). But idiomatic diffraction cannot be used to mirror things. It is *not* a one-to-one photographing of the subject matter. That would be tantamount to upholding the colonising

logic, in which difference always means difference from something that is already fixed. Rather, it means investigating and reading diffractively through an idiom, so as to follow and affirm the tendencies and movements that emerge as the idiom and the empirical material are filtered together while the impact of the idiom breaks the material apart. It is in this sense that the methodology of idiomatic diffraction can support a critique of an ontology that is riddled with holes.

What this adds is that while diffraction as a methodology does not offer the researcher or the audience a way to escape their whiteness, it can upset the researcher's own settled mapping of the terrain. In what sense is the diffraction concept then (not) 'innocent', then? And in what ways does something stay absent? Feminist scholarship has drawn heavily on Barad's interweaving of light and water waves from quantum physics, but although diffraction is all about patterns and the implications of patterns for differences and sameness, studies of race, racialisation and minoritisation/majoritisation processes drawing on diffraction are in rather short supply. In *Diffracting Diffraction*, Barad (2014), as mentioned above, unpacks the concept of diffraction along its various genealogical threads back to Trinh Min-ha and Gloria Anzaldúa, and thus also to race and colonialism. This trajectory has been at the heart of our project, because it shares feminist insights about both differences and sameness(es), just as the concept refutes absolutes and points to simultaneity and dis/continuities. But Barad's text does not directly confront the phenomenon of race and racialisation: it hints at it, but for the most part, race exists as an epistemological backdrop, with a tendency to keep disappearing. To put it in polemical terms, race as ontology is still only fleetingly present in Barad's text.

This is not particularly remarkable, as Barad's subject matter is physics, not diversity management in the academic world. At the same time, the queer-feminist diffraction concept also shows clear traces of a Californian origin with its own take on postcolonialism and multiculturalism, a take that is rather different from that of the Danish postcolonial culture

of silence and exceptionalism, and equality that is bonded to monocultural imperatives. As Barad herself is keen to point out, a generic universal template can never be adequate: the specificity of the empirical always has to be taken into account, and concepts always need to be adjusted.

Haraway (1997) turns her attention to other species beyond the human. Here too, the subject matter foregrounds a more explicit concern about race. Haraway writes that race is an unsteady phenomenon that is at once manifest and illusory. It pursues us even when its existence is denied. This is why we invited the elephant idiom and the postcolonial archive into feminist new materialist methodologies, in order to emphasise ghostly ontologies that orbit around absent presence and the co-constitution of the absent in the present (Derrida, 1994). Diffractive methodologies have the potential for unravelling neglected, forgotten ontologies and thereby foreground the affective qualities of what feels ‘unheimlich’ and uncanny.

On the other hand, the vocabulary around hauntology has its own political and ethical complications in dealing with the issue of race. For the ghost hunt may end - like the plot in Philip Roth’s novel, *The Human Stain* (2000) - with the word “spook”. Today we know and translate this word as “ghost”, but in the 1940s it meant a black skin that was hard to see in the dark. Ghost metaphors has to be used with care. With its colonial heritage as primary, the elephant idiom has served for us as an ethically sustainable alternative. Rather than suggesting that minority and majority are foundational social categories, as Barad’s 2014-text tends to do, the elephant idiom allows power, minoritisation and majoritisation to come to the fore as bound to race. So while it is interesting to read race into a ghost story, there is a serious and very apparent danger (as *The Human Stain* so subtly makes clear) of making the racial other into the ghost, rather than revealing race and racial hauntologies as a phenomenon that haunts everyone, but is felt very differently by the privileged compared with the non-privileged. By tracing the hauntologies of “energized spacetime-matter”, the methodology of idiomatic

diffraction may supplement our understanding of how both specific racial configurations and the (iterative re)making of a racialised scale (Mans' project) itself emerge in higher education. Speaking back to diffraction itself, the twisting through the idiom also reminds us that what we use as our diffractive device matters.

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