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### **Globalized Interfaces and Anticolonial Engagements with Material Technologies of Empire: Tabita Rezaire and Morehshin Allahyari's Works**

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Globalized Interfaces and Anticolonial Engagements with Material  
Technologies of Empire: Tabita Rezaire and Morehshin Allahyari's Works

by  
NEELUFAR FRANKLIN

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR PEREZ DE MENDIOLA  
PROFESSOR AISENBERG

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*Scholars, especially those interested in the evolving nature of Black politics, must take seriously the possibility that in the space created by deviant discourse and practice, especially in Black communities, a new radical politics of deviance could emerge.*

—Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance”

*Her labor is necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all of that, she disappears.*

—Fred Moten & Stefano Harvey, *The Undercommons*

## Introduction

The operative networks that we rely on to digitally connect worlds so seamlessly and efficiently, re(lie)ly on infrastructure that is much more entrenched than, say, a conceptual ‘cloud;’ and the technologies that are put to work for “ease” in life are just as entrenched in a deep infinitude of violence. The rhetoric of digital technology is ethereal, floating, meant to manufacture a sense of seamlessness and ease for the operating systems running the networks transporting information and communication<sup>1</sup>—technology is sometimes already imagined as immaterial. Oftentimes, the work that has gone into producing technology’s obscure ethers is slighted—sometimes insidiously and sometimes with brief admittance—in discourses on new media, futurity, and cybernetic culture<sup>2</sup>. The globalization of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is far from universal and the stratification of its potential connectivity is apparent in the simplest of ways, such as internet access, search engine expediency, or “new-tech” releases/launches<sup>3</sup>. The transformation of

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<sup>1</sup> Information and Communication Technology” (ICT) is a phrase I have found most useful for referencing the specific kind of technology in question in this essay. Unless described otherwise, “technology” used here means ICT.

<sup>2</sup> Cybernetic culture being defined here and in this essay as a culture of fierce, cyclical control with and through automated technologies and machinery. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of cybernetics is: “the science of communication and control theory that is concerned especially with the comparative study of automatic control systems (such as the nervous system and brain and mechanical-electrical communication systems).” (“cybernetics.” Merriam-Webster.com. 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com> on 11 October 2019)). Much of feminist, new materialist discourse is rightfully critical of cybernetics, as much as it addresses its role in the creation of any operating system (even ones used for subversion) digitally or theoretically-employed.

<sup>3</sup> Like the annual iPhone releases or new product design releases for “old” hardware (laptops, headphones, TVs, etc.); usually attended by huge crowds, publicity, and lines for a purchase.

globalization to the neoliberalization<sup>4</sup> of markets, production, interests, and socialization have made extraordinary claims that with the so-called proliferation of new technology, there will be more freedom in lives, customization, and connectedness. The disparity in technological distribution, like the rest of the market-driven world, of course remains, and is intentionally wielded. The conversations emerging from feminist new materialist discourses address, among many other topics, why the primary capitalist interests for developments in technoscience<sup>5</sup> must be tackled while also engaging with the fraught foundations of technological knowledge production itself. The resulting “technofeminisms<sup>6</sup>” are (not always, but the ones that take precedence in this essay) anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and center black, queer, & indigenous theorizing & practices in their approaches.

The topic of posthumanism also enters this discussion. The work of scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, called “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism,” which offers crucial theorizations on the construction of race

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<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism being faux-claims that there will be unprecedented and inconsequential access to new information, personalization, and streamlined efficiency in everyone’s life.

<sup>5</sup> Technoscience being the resulting field from the combination of science and technology, my use of the term branches from feminist studies in the fields of technoscience, science, and more frequently here, technology. In A.J. Berg’s essay “The Cyborg, Its Friends and Feminist Theories of Materiality” in a section titled “Feminist, Niels Bohr, and Agential Realism” she designates science and technology studies as STS, and states that in feminist critique “the boundary between nature and culture has been examined and to various degrees erased as an ontological distinction” (Berg, 2019, 76). She then goes further to describe the shift in focus on materialism has presented new interest in “the posthuman” and why Karen Barad’s concept of “agential realism” and “entanglement” has taken precedence in “the materialist turn.”

<sup>6</sup> I pluralize the word technofeminism to address the multiplicity of feminist practice and the necessary plurality and difference to those approaches.

and the negligence of knowledge production by new materialist and posthumanists, is perhaps one of the most important foundational pieces for my understanding of posthumanism and its discourse<sup>7</sup>:

“What posthumanists held in common was a critique of the Enlightenment subject’s claims to mastery, autonomy, and dominance over material and virtual worlds. [...] posthumanism remained committed to a specific *order of rationality*.” (Jackson, 2013, 671).

The internet (at large) enables mass communication and rapid circulation of information, media, images, stories, and more, through a variety of pathways: websites, apps, search engines, etc. Capitalist globalism has ensured consumer-oriented coalitions and politics, leaving only a handful of media conglomerates in charge of creating platforms and access. Additionally, the control and ownership of information is central to the functioning neoliberalization of economic and social life, for instance: with deregulation and privatization companies can sell information that has been data mined on platforms, or the need for an automated labor force (instead of, say, improving worker conditions) that lead to 3D-printing software programs, or the patented pieces/parts of war weaponry made by companies and interests that can also easily be involved in “benign”—even “radical”—art curation<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the production of technology and informatics has a foundational connection to the violence of war, (neo-)colonialism and

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson, Z. I. (2013). “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism,” *Feminist Studies*, 39(3). 669-685.

<sup>8</sup> A small example like the recent controversy of Warren Kanders who was a (now former) vice chairman of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, and also owned Safariland, a company that produces military supplies like tear gas and partially owns Sierra Bullets, which has been linked to lethal war crimes by the Israeli army against Palestinian civilians. Small, Z. (2019). “Warren Kanders Resigns from Whitney Museum Board After Months of Controversy and Protest.” Retrieved from <https://hyperallergic.com/511052/warren-kanders-resigns/>.

(neo-)imperialism, and the logic of capitalism. The logic of capitalism shamelessly incorporates exploitation, domination, and division, (etc.) into the foundation (let's say, the hardware, the interfaces) of the technology and technologic production, it is cybernetic at its core—as A.J. Berg puts it: “the machinery of ‘capitalism, war, oppression, exploitation, and killing’ (Berg, 2019, 76). In Donna Haraway’s familiar “A Cyborg Manifesto”<sup>9</sup> her critique of cybernetic culture, what she calls “informatics of domination” (Haraway, 1991, 160), engenders ‘the cyborg’: a symbol of post-human futurity, produced by its violent environment, a hybrid of entangled life, a material-semiotic hybrid, and conceptually intent on a socialist-feminist practice of living.

The discourses and theorizations engaged with here sometimes lead to the question of futurity; and like the many writers whose work I admire and hope to build upon, I challenge the hegemonized ideas of a future that further stratifies life and subsequently distances us from incisive analyses of the multitudinous ways of living and life that has gone on throughout/against/and with legacies of violence. Without critical feminisms and new materialist insight discussions about technology can take a myopic focus towards progressivist futurity. The speculative utopian ideas of a techno-futurity are not what I’m interested in this essay, the contested location of technological development or internet interfaces “is not an innocent place” (76 Berg). Speculative futurity cannot come from utopian visions and if the conditions for a

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<sup>9</sup> Haraway, D. (1991). “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminist in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-181. London, New York: Routledge.

techno-futurity are designed with the legacies and imprints of colonialism as their foundations and interfaces, the digital fabric of the future is in the contested “not innocent” location that (as Jackson notes) will privilege the normative and Western imperialist logics of liberal humanism ignoring the analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability. The digital and technologic fabric of the present and possible future are enmeshed with legacies of antiblackness, colonialism, Orientalism<sup>10</sup>, and ableism—they are already coded as matrices of domination and control. I’d like to point out here that decolonization as metaphor<sup>11</sup> must be excised and critiqued and moments of action against imperial wealth, settler colonialism, must be centered at the fore of conversations about decolonization, as Tuck and Yang elucidate in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor:”

“Decolonization is “unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity [...] [because] settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 7).

Throughout time the methodology and practice of violence has changed, and the narrative of colonial violence has been elided in most articulations of hegemonic history<sup>12</sup>. In discourses surrounding the topic of decolonization, imagined futurities are most perspicacious when they’re envisioned to dislocate hegemonic ideas of

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<sup>10</sup> Said, Edward W (2003). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

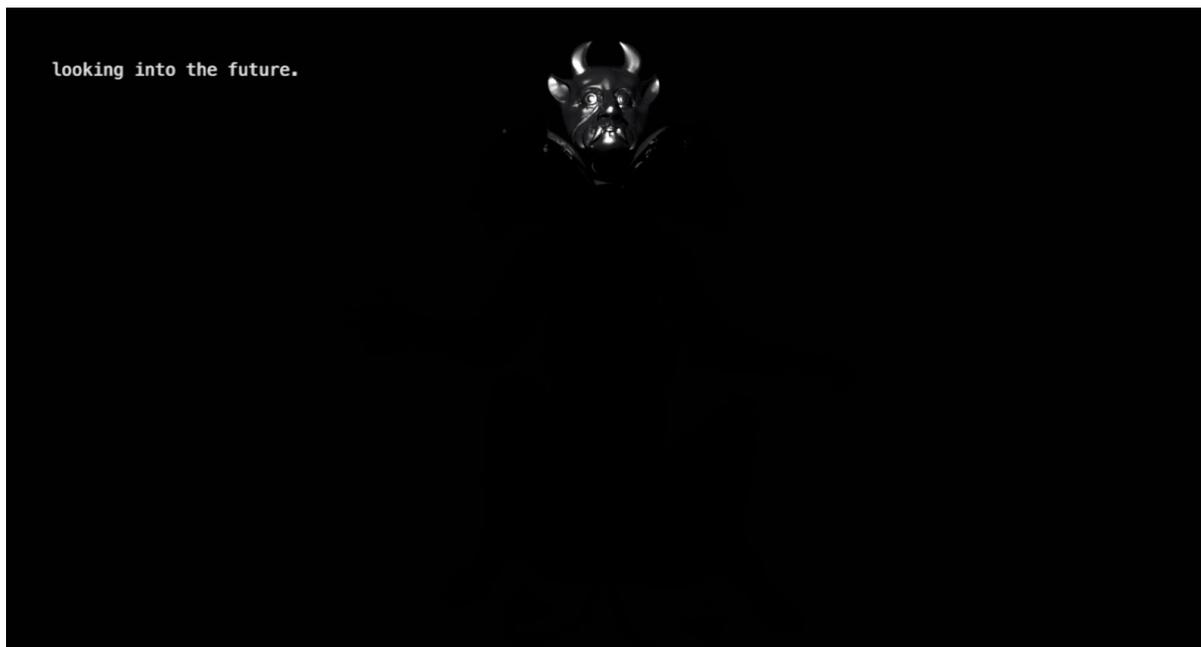
<sup>11</sup> Tuck, E., Yang, K. W. (2012). “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1). 1-40.

<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon provides a notable exception to the elision of violent histories in his psychiatric study of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Describing the encounter of the colonizer and colonized, Fanon identifies that “their first confrontation was colored by violence,” specifically, “the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer” (Fanon, 1963, 2).  
Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

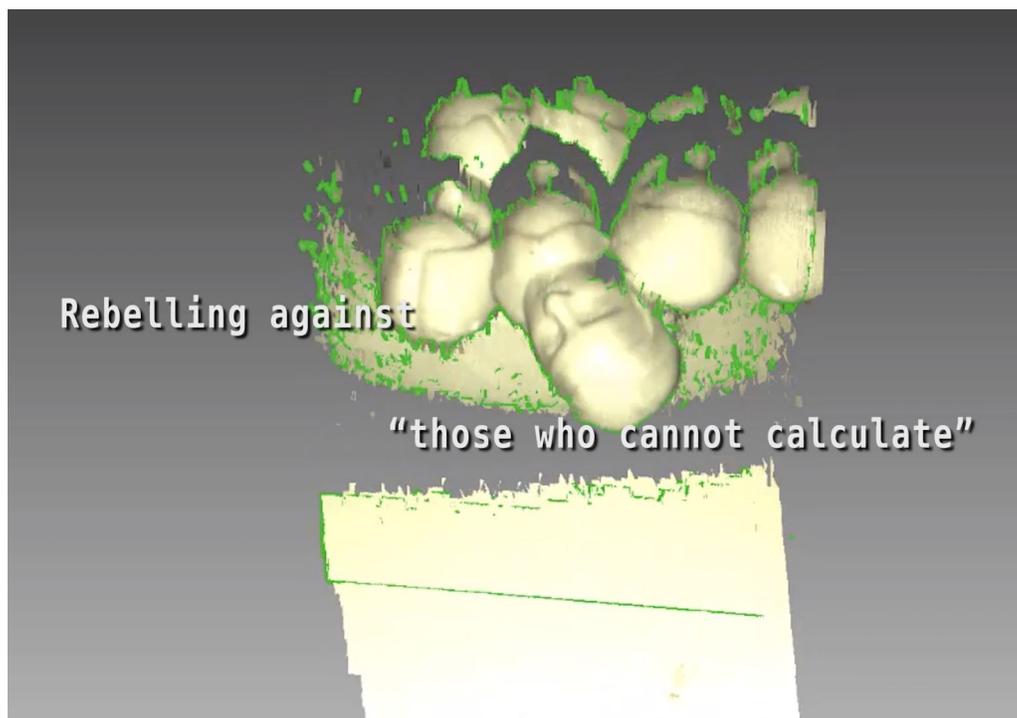
histories passed, the catastrophic present, and the possibility of more violent futures. In those counter-narratives are new discourses of engagement with resistances past, present, and future. They constitute the “impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different” (Fanon, 1963, 6). The new narratives that emerge from life told through mysticisms and spirituality hold value and echo Fanon’s assertion that “confronting the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints” (Fanon, 1963, 6). Furthermore, the counter-cultural productions they produce offset the logics of violence and oppression.

What I aim to take up in this essay are works from two artists that engage with technologic feminisms about mysticism, anti-coloniality, anti-blackness, orientalism, and counter-narratives. The two artists, Tabita Rezaire and Morehshin Allahyari, through the use of new media, 3D printing, lectures, video pieces, and hypertext narrative interrogate and challenge the ontology of technology.

Allahyari’s series “She Who Sees The Unknown” is a multimedia project of video, narrative, and archive, and so far includes four figures/parts:



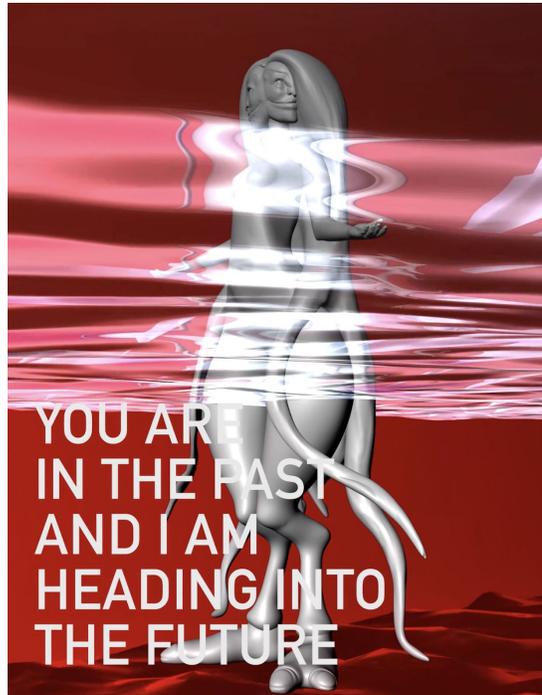
Allahyari, M. (2016). *She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma* (Online).<sup>13</sup>



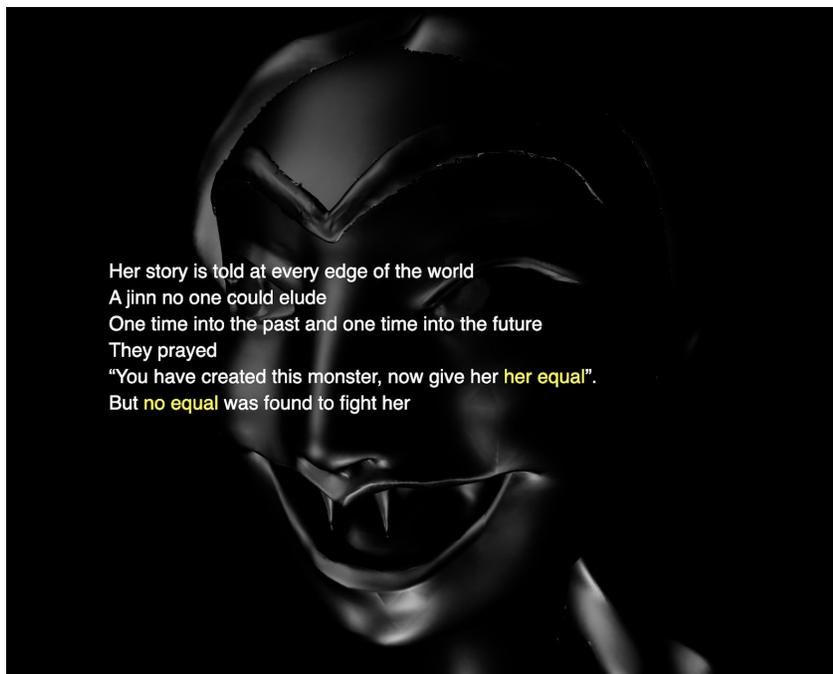
Allahyari, M. (2017). *She Who Sees the Unknown: Ya’jooj Ma’jooj* (Online).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/huma/>.

<sup>14</sup> Retrieved from <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/yajooj-majooj/>.



Allahyari, M. (2019). *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha* (Online)<sup>15</sup>.



Allahyari, M. (2019). *She Who Sees the Unknown: The Laughing Snake* (Online).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Retrieved from <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/aisha-qandisha/>.

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved from <https://whitney.org/artport-commissions/laughing-snake/index.html#>.

“In *She Who Sees The Unknown* I use 3D modeling, 3D scanning, 3D printing, and storytelling to re-create monstrous female/queer figures of Middle Eastern origin, using the traditions and myths associated with them to explore the catastrophes of colonialism, patriarchy, and environmental degradation in relationship to the Middle East” (Allahyari, 2019)<sup>17</sup>.

Each of her figures are representations of djinns, referenced in Islamic mysticism; Allahyari renders their forms and and 3D scans and prints them, they are then documented (sometimes their material printed versions are documented in videos and sometimes the virtual renderings are central to the video pieces. The audio overlaid (or interacted with by the reader) is Allahyari retelling the stories of each djinn. Allahyari documents and recreates (or “Re-figures,” a term Allahyari coined in 2016 and uses as a central concept in her work) archives of the djinns with narratives that parallel the contemporary world while restructuring histories and re-envisioning fraught futurity.

Tabita Rezaire’s video piece *DEEP DOWN TIDAL*<sup>18</sup> includes new media juxtapositions and lecture-form audio to make pointed critique on “electronic colonialism” (Rezaire 2017) driven by capitalism/neocolonialism.

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<sup>17</sup> Retrieved from <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/about/>.

<sup>18</sup> Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>19</sup>.

She poignantly recalls the mappings of slave trade routes recreated by the networks for undersea fiber-optic cables—the ones responsible for transporting global internet data. Rezaire’s piece offers a new rendering of a history of colonialism, an archival practice that highlights the absence/amnesia of destruction and harm and all of its present iterations in “virtual reality” (but with material consequences). Rezaire’s

<sup>19</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

work points to the materiality of the internet, data, and virtual interactions, and how they are both products and tools for neocolonialism, control, and violence. Her incorporation of water memory/knowledge, as “a repository of lineage” and “a sanctuary of Black knowledge” (Rezaire 2017). She goes on to give a sort of retributive possibility of a future with the knowledge that water has held from histories of violence across the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and that the possibility of harnessing spirituality counters the power of virtual knowledge that continues to perpetrate violence.

The engagements with the present state of technological and cybernetic culture and futures that are envisioned by Tabita Rezaire and Morehshin Allahyari offer techno-feminist critiques to the reality of the mattering for the interfaces of the internet—“which include material data transfer across colonial mappings” (Rezaire 2017)—and also procure, with those same technologies, counterdiscourses, counterfuturity, and alter-historicity against hegemonic influences.

## ***DEEP DOWN TIDAL* by Tabita Rezaire**

Tabita Rezaire’s anticolonial art practice spans across genre and material. I found Rezaire’s video art piece, *DEEP DOWN TIDAL*<sup>20</sup>, to be one of her pieces that encompasses a breadth of information and insightful artistic critique; and it was one that I felt to be the most generative as I analyzed neocolonial/neoimperial materialism and conceptualized resistances and possible futurities. Rezaire’s publicly available video, *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* layers lecture and poetic audio over computer generated moving images, text, and videos. Labeling it as “the architecture of violence,” (Rezaire 2017)<sup>21</sup> one of her most striking observations is in the mapping of oceanic fiber optic network cables that mirror the routes of slave ships in the transatlantic slave trade, which is itself a mapping of “electronic colonialism.”

To allow for a clear understanding of the definition of electronic capitalism/colonialism, we can turn to the video itself. Rezaire, informing rather than assuming pre-existing experiences with these complex frameworks, outlines the concept for the listener/viewer within the first two minutes:

“Electronic colonialism is the domination and control of digital technologies by the west to maintain and expand their hegemonic power over the rest of the world” (Rezaire 2017)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

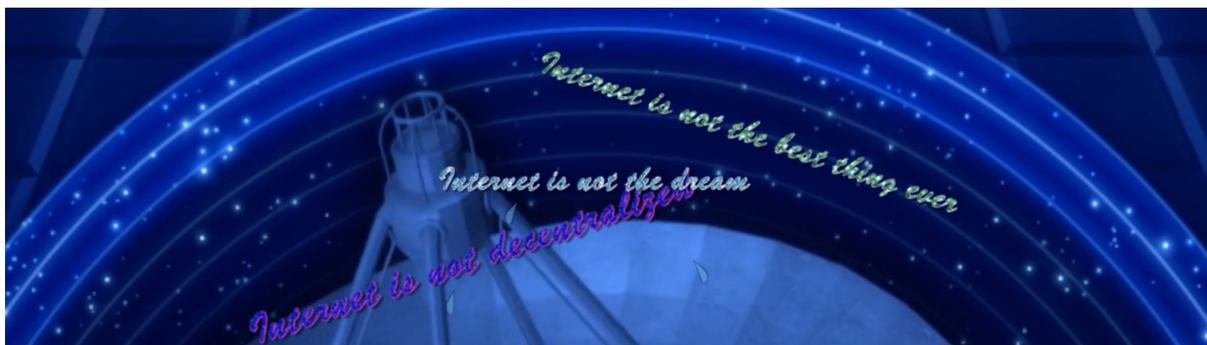
<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Using examples of major, ideology-monopolizing platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Youtube, Rezaire visually exposes the manner in which western hegemonic thought slithers its influence into the global collective mind. Rezaire also references Ziauddin Sardar, underpinning the conceptual framework of how legacies of colonialism continue to be translated into electronic colonialism and the interfaces of “cyberspace:”

“The west urgently needs places to conquer and where they don’t actually exist, they must be created. Enter, cyberspace” (Sardar, 1995)<sup>23</sup>.

These interpretations of electronic colonialism spanning across the realms of both “real” and virtual (/cyber) space suggest an explicit and intentional violence over a population of global subjects. These assertions directly counter the mainstream ideals of “The Internet” as a decentralized, democratic platform.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Sardar, Z. (1995). “alt.civilizations.faq: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West.” *Futures*, 27(7). 777-794. As mentioned in *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* by Tabita Rezaire.

<sup>24</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

Despite the explicit and intentional violence within electronic colonization, Rezaire, in an interview, acknowledged that: “we accept, and worse, enjoy an abusive framework they’ve created for us” (Rezaire 2017)<sup>25</sup>. By embedding examples of the human subjects of the video singing along to multi-lingual pop songs—juxtaposed with images of the transatlantic slave trade routes, heavy machinery laying the foundation of submarine fiber cable networks, and the material artefacts of digital surveillance—the triviality of the ways in which people benefit from these data networks is stark. Similar to how the operative iterations of surveillance and colonialism happen all the time, there is also a destabilization of the logic while participating in it.

Another iteration of the (at times) willful participation that Rezaire introduces into her piece is that of the prominence of Black people, Black visages, and Black expressions within memes.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Rezaire, T. (2017 March). “Tabita Rezaire - Fighting for Love.” Tabita Rezaire interviewed by Keely Shinnars, *Autre Magazine*. Retrieved from [https://autre.love/interviewsmain/tag/tabita-rezaire?fbclid=IwAR2n\\_CwLHoMRgZrmQKVH\\_kRW52LXXl2Gvv1P9xeMteuSSpUuObRyooFwwRo](https://autre.love/interviewsmain/tag/tabita-rezaire?fbclid=IwAR2n_CwLHoMRgZrmQKVH_kRW52LXXl2Gvv1P9xeMteuSSpUuObRyooFwwRo).

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

By allowing, for all intents and purposes, Black countenances and culture to be the Face of the internet, therein lies an intentional dissonance. Rezaire is signifying that while this may be misconstrued as being in a position of power, the continued use of Black likeness (now, circulated images) is yet another iteration of “the colonized” being used as part of a workforce—the material benefits of which are only seen by the unseen few at the top controlling, driving, and profiting off of these networks of information. Aria Dean characterizes it well in her 2016 essay, “Rich Meme, Poor Meme<sup>27</sup>,” saying we are stuck “in a time loop wherein black people innovate only to see their forms snaked away, value siphoned off by white hands” (Dean 2016). In reality, there is no dissonance to this claim. This system is a continuation, an adaptation, of exploited labor and cultural impact from the Black diaspora.



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<sup>27</sup> Dean, A. (2016 July). “Poor Meme, Rich Meme.” *Real Life*. Retrieved from <https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>28</sup>.

As Rezaire elucidates above, colonialism functions beyond geographic or spatial domination and the logic extends control to new domains as they are created, as Rezaire says: “Cyberspace is one of the many ways colonial domination survived after its defeat” (Rezaire 2017)<sup>29</sup>. Further, the logic of colonialism is embedded in the logic of capitalism, as Rezaire also points out in her video and in an interview<sup>30</sup> that the (cyber)colonial enterprise is, inevitably, simultaneously a capitalist one.

Returning to Aria Dean’s excavation, and the impossibility of retaining control over the means (memes) of production: “memes—even when produced by black users—cannot be viewed as objects that once authentically circulated in black circles for the enjoyment of the black collective, but instead are always already compromised by the looming presence of the corporate, the capitalist” (Dean 2016)<sup>31</sup>. E-colonialism

<sup>28</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

<sup>29</sup> Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

<sup>30</sup> Rezaire, T. (2017 March). “Tabita Rezaire - Fighting for Love.” Tabita Rezaire interviewed by Keely Shiners, *Autre Magazine*. Retrieved from [https://autre.love/interviewsmain/tag/tabita-rezaire?fbclid=IwAR2n\\_CwLHoMRgZrmQKVH\\_kRW52LXXl2Gvv1P9xeMteuSSpUuObRyooFwvRo](https://autre.love/interviewsmain/tag/tabita-rezaire?fbclid=IwAR2n_CwLHoMRgZrmQKVH_kRW52LXXl2Gvv1P9xeMteuSSpUuObRyooFwvRo).

<sup>31</sup> Dean, A. (2016 July). “Poor Meme, Rich Meme.” *Real Life*. Retrieved from <https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/>.

controls our minds through our consumerist desires, dangling the idea of becoming compensated for participation and/or creative labor through corporate tools of the system<sup>32</sup>.

The globalized interfaces of the operative networks transporting communication and data are idealized for their inconsequential ease and accommodation. The economic and market-driven forces create uneven political geographies across the world by necessitating dependency on Western importations. In the focus of the lens offered by Rezaire, that dependency takes the form of technologic hardware importation, which is necessary for the transfer of communication data. Rezaire maintains:

“Electronic colonialism is controlling the mind through digital devices and sustains the dependency on dominating nation-states in the west for digital access...third world countries are electronic colonies force fed information from western world, under the guise of globalization”<sup>33</sup> (Rezaire 2017).

Neoliberal globalization takes hold once again, making its faux-claims of bringing democracy and power to individuals, while primarily and always already perpetuating power imbalances that rely only on different iterations of the same violent histories of imperialism and colonialism. Through Rezaire’s use of video art and technology to format her art and research the mode of resistance is through technology—and still, the same ones operating on the networks of violence. The fetishization of the globalization and its accommodationism is fallible to the imbalances of power as its

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<sup>32</sup> Dean notes in particular, a meme of a young, white boy, (Damn) Daniel, who is videoed sporting Vans™ on a daily basis. Once viral, Daniel received a lifetime supply of shoes from the company as a gift for his free marketing. Unsurprisingly, Black people featured in similar (and countless) viral productions are rarely compensated for their contributions.

<sup>33</sup> Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online). Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

connected to uneven political geographies/markets. As Cruz-Malave and Manalansan synthesize in their introduction to *Queer Globalizations*, the image of “global modernness [is] consistent with capitalist market exchange” (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan, 2002, 2)<sup>34</sup>.

Rather than existing amongst the clouds—which corporate giants such as Apple and Google would like to have digital communities believe—data transport is instead a physical, tangible, and vulnerable network of submarine fiber optic cables that are the foundation of our internet. The use of the word “cloud” is another agent for displacing consequence and materiality of violence, the financial strongholds behind technological corporations use metonymies (like “the cloud”) to further remove the relationship that information, communication, and the ease of interconnectedness have to infrastructures like undersea fiber optic network cables. Used to transport data, telecommunication, and networking over unfathomable distances, the cables are established in even more places than just the ocean floor, sometimes across land on telephone poles or in the ground underneath cities and towns. There are approximately 378<sup>35</sup> submarine fiber optic cables spanning across the Earth. Many are privately owned and some cables are owned through a consortium of interests involved. Newer cables are often placed according to investors’ interests; Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon are major investors<sup>36</sup>

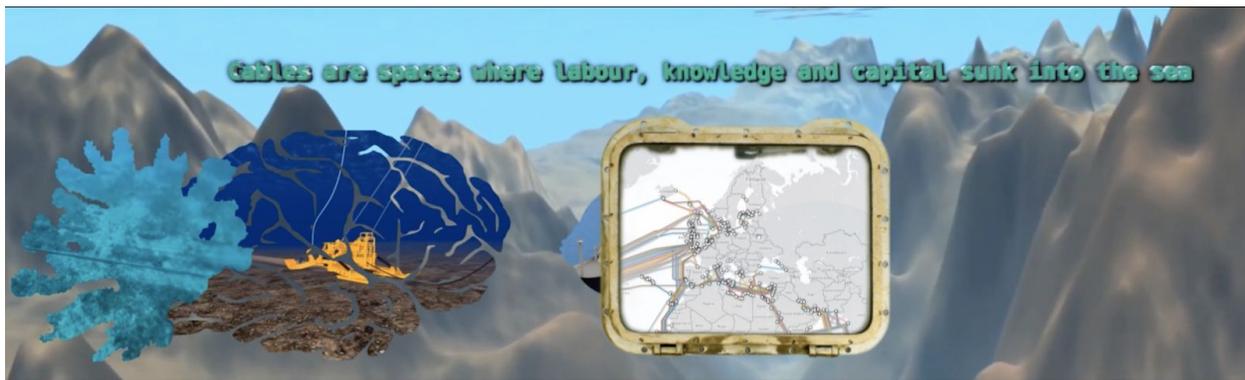
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<sup>34</sup> Cruz-Malavé, A., Manalansan, M. F. (2002). *Queer Globalizations*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>35</sup> Telegeography. (n.d.). “Submarine Cable Frequently Asked Questions.” Retrieved from <https://www2.telegeography.com/submarine-cable-faqs-frequently-asked-questions>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

of the construction and placement of new cables. The cables transfer information and communication, connecting and bearing the fruits of globalization. Rezaire shows and explicates lucidly how the cables are not only disruptive of ecosystems (sharks attack them, more on this from Rezaire later) but also how the cables are “spaces where labor knowledge and capital sunk into the sea” that they “are the hardware of new imperialism” and “our communication system is layered into a geopolitical matrix of preexisting colonial routes” (Rezaire 2017).





Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>37</sup>.

The fiber optic network cables are material interfaces of the internet, slave routes, and colonialism. The submarine fiber optic cable networks are infrastructural necessities for transporting data, contrary to a “cloud” storage idea which is an idea fabricated to further remove users from the material interfaces providing them with convenience and expediency. Through her video Rezaire sutures together hegemonic cultural legacies by pointing out how the materiality of technology is a reiteration of colonialism/imperialism—her pieces deconstruct a cultural legacy that a) produces the absence of destruction and violence and b) reimposes those same atrocities in new ways (neoimperialism, neoliberalism, capitalism, etc.). In addition, *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* presents the possibility for a vision of anticolonial memory generation that re-members “manufactured amnesia” (Rezaire 2017) and “a history of decolonization”(Fanon, 1963, 15) through Black resistance and knowledge.

<sup>37</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>38</sup>.

In its presentation, form, and content *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* explicates that the virtual realities of our present are only new iterations of colonialism passed: “expansion, freedom, knowledge” (Rezaire 2017). The importance of water, and the manipulation of it, is another central theme in the work. Rezaire makes a striking observation between the sharks that followed slaveships across oceanic slave trade routes to feed on the Black people thrown overboard slaveships to the sharks that attack the oceanic fiber optic network cables across the seafloor.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>39</sup>.

The observation is not necessarily drawing a parallel between the two but is invoking something more, as the video continues an analysis of “nature-knowledge” comes forth. Rezaire’s narration of water as “a repository of lineage” and a sanctuary of Black knowledge” that “remembers and copies information, carries data, records and circulates, [and is] a communication interface, a technology” (Rezaire 2017).

Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>40</sup> describes how, in discourse, systems of “statements” are what generate meanings for expressions, conditions for those expressions, and the fields of use for their expressions (Foucault, 1972, 145). Here, Water functions as an “expression” with various “statements” that set up its field of use—Rezaire generates its meaning outside of its hegemonic meaning (its exploitation) and offers a counter discourse (or statement) from a decolonial ontology. Additionally, Foucault calls the system of statements an “archive,” saying:

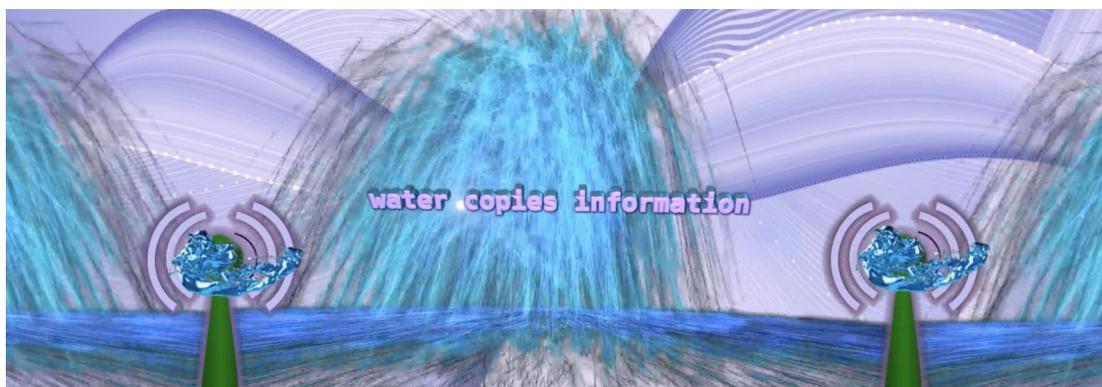
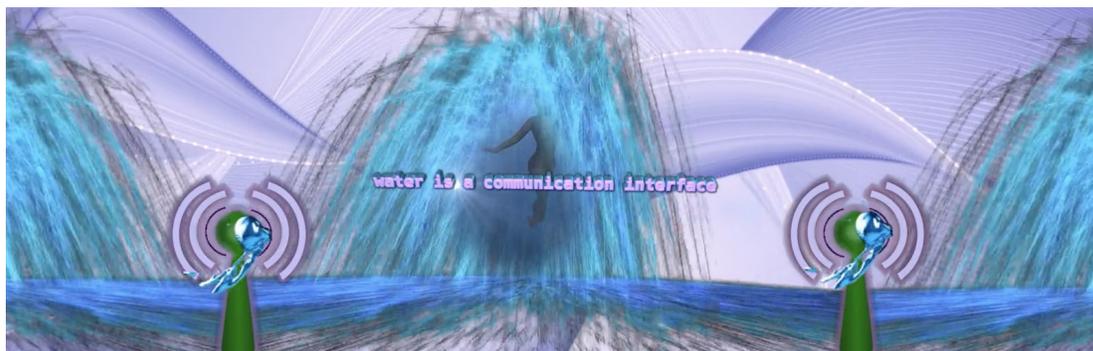
“The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But... is also that which determines that all these things said... are grouped together in distinct figures, composed

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Foucault, M., Sheridan, A. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London; New York: Routledge.

together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities” (Foucault, 1972, 145-146)<sup>41</sup>.

The archive is restructured through Rezaire’s video-art-lecture piece, pointing out (through the narrativization in the video by Black women and, in doing that, centers Black knowledge/ontology) that water has accumulated such archival information to offer recourse from colonial, imperial, capitalist violence and creates a repository of resistance & history. *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* acts to blur the perception of the so-called ontological differences between nature and culture (or, nature and the presumed immutable hegemonic knowledge) “differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration” (Foucault, 1972, 146)<sup>42</sup>.




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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Rezaire, T. (2017). *DEEP DOWN TIDAL* (Online)<sup>43</sup>.

Throughout the course of the video, Black people tell a new historical narrative, construct the context for the violence of the present, and offer a rendering of healing & retributive colonial consequences<sup>44</sup>—all of these defy temporal limitations and span an anachronistic narrative. Superimposing Black knowledge and nature knowledge across a retelling of history (just one mode of analysis for this

<sup>43</sup> Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

<sup>44</sup> “The colonized subject discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation” (Fanon, 1963, 21).

loaded video artwork) is a practice of constructing alternative realities that destabilize and decentralize global authority.

### ***She Who Sees The Unknown* by Morehshin Allahyari**

The poetic and queer-feminist retelling of the story of jinns is a foundational, guiding aspect in Morehshin Allahyari's art series *She Who Sees the Unknown*. Allahyari's use of 3D modeling, 3D scanning, 3D printing, and storytelling through various modes and genres (video, online hypertext narrative, audio, and computer generated imaging) serves as a point of departure from a 'Cyborg vs Goddess' narrative and offers a generative feminist new materialist perspective on contemporary politics. The jinn renderings represent (or re-present) the possibilities of alter-realities or futurities beyond a colonial/post-colonial scope while also offering incisive counterdiscourses to contemporary crises across political and temporal geographies.

To preface Allahyari's work and unpack the multiplicities of her art in form, narration, and context, a situated understanding of jinns and their location within Islamic thought (and an explanation of the jinns that Allahyari references directly) is necessary. The topic of jinn has not been heavily written about or theorized<sup>45</sup>—which Allahyari notes, employs as an element in her work, and uses it as an opportunity to

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<sup>45</sup> For this essay, I am limited both by time and the scope of access I have to English language texts.

generate new archives—and in the following explanations I found 2 useful texts that provided the most information about jinns’ locations in the Muslim imaginary. Amira el-Zein wrote a book, called *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn*<sup>46</sup>, that provides a foundational introduction to how the notion of jinn operates beyond Western conceptions of religion, throughout Islamic worldviews, and are referenced in Quranic readings. My aim here is to briefly cover the work that some scholars like el-Zein and Umar Sulaiman al-Ashqar<sup>47</sup>, have generated and consolidated on the topic of jinns, to contextualize what jinns’ meanings/locations merit across Islamic cultures, and what those meanings are in conversation with Allahyari’s departures from them in her work on the jinns: “*Huma, Ya’jooj Ma’jooj, Aisha Qandisha, and The Laughing Snake.*”

Jinns are generally represented & understood in the Muslim imaginary as manifestations (physically and metaphysically) of alter, dark forces usually responsible for illnesses and bad happenstances of the like and Allahyari specifically creates and narrates re-presentations of the dark forces of queered jinns. El-Zein describes multiversal Muslim understanding of “manifest and invisible domains” (el-Zein, 2009, 2) that jinns operate across as “dual dimensional” (in the Islamic structure of the cosmos (el-Zein, 2009, 7)) entities with intellectual capabilities to make decisions between good & evil, similar to humans. Al-Ashqar additionally

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<sup>46</sup> El-Zein, A. (2009). *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j5d836](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j5d836).

<sup>47</sup> Al-Ashqar, U. S. (2003). *The World of the Jinn and Devils in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*. International Islamic Publishing House.

provides Quranic references to jinns and jinns' origin stories, which precede human creation, that Allah created them from fire (al-Ashqar, 2003, 5).

“Among a race created by Allah prior to humans...” (Allahyari)<sup>48</sup>.

Jinns are the spiritual entities that inhabit the Earth but are unseen to the human eye<sup>49</sup> and their effective manifestations and consequences are endless. They are supposed to inhabit deep, ruinous places, for example, “where there are many impure things, such as bathrooms, hashish dens, the places of the camels, cemeteries...” (al-Ashqar, 2003, 24). Jinns can be benevolent or evil; however, distinctly different from the paradigm of demons and angels. They can also possess or take on the shapes of humans or animals (al-Ashqar, 2003, 32) while also allowing, of course, that humans are merely animals. Al-Ashqar describes jinns as:

“a third type of being, apart from angels or humans. They are intelligent and understanding creatures... They are responsible for their actions and have been ordered by Allah to perform some deeds and to abstain from others” (al-Ashqar, 2003, 9)<sup>50</sup>.

The concept of jinns acting through liminal navigations of the world within Islamic mysticisms is worth exploring further. The focus here remains how Allahyari's use of jinns “to explore the catastrophes of colonialism, patriarchy, and environmental degradation in relationship to the Middle East” (Allahyari 2019)<sup>51</sup> provides a new

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<sup>48</sup> The introduction of each series includes the same narration from Allahyari, this is one of the lines of the audio.

<sup>49</sup> See el-Zein's chapter “The Poetics of the Invisible: Muslim Imagination and the Jinn” in *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn*.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Ashqar, U. S. (2003). *The World of the Jinn and Devils in the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*. International Islamic Publishing House.

<sup>51</sup> Allahyari, M. (2019). “She Who Sees the Unknown, ‘About.’” Retrieved from [shewhoseestheunknown.com/about/](http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/about/).

theoretical deployment for imagining the present state of catastrophe as well as entrance to alter-futurity.

The choice to use 3D printing—a common commercially employed device of post-Fordist hyper-productivity made to be able to replicate materials efficiently and without any manual craftsmanship—is a deliberate choice on Allahyari’s part<sup>52</sup>. The manipulation of 3D printing interfacing and operating systems to materialize a new archive for counterdiscourse, putting a brief, as Fanon says, “end to the history of colonization and the history of despoliation in order to bring to life... the history of decolonization” (Fanon, 1963, 15). The materialization of each jinn in *She Who Sees the Unknown* extends beyond just their narratives; in their varied forms, each one offers an articulation of ontology in a posthumanist framing that destabilizes Orientalist hegemonic discourse and that repositions an interface as a tool of resistance against power.

Taking up the personas of “dark goddesses, monstrous, and jinn queer/female figures of Middle-Eastern origin,” (Allahyari 2019)<sup>53</sup> the referenced jinns could on one hand provide a counternarrative to the global, sinister Islamophobic rhetoric inciting horrific violences. They also become speculative archives themselves, reflecting on contemporary disasters and turning the hegemonic blame on its head, imagining a future of perhaps ruin but one that involves an anti-Orientalist perspective and an

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<sup>52</sup> Allahyari, with David Rourke, devised and edited the “3D Additivist Manifesto” as “a call to push creative technologies to their absolute limits and beyond into the realm of the speculative, the provocative and the weird.” It is an extensive collection from artists around the globe who use technology, counter and turn the technologies on their heads in using them, and generate pasts, alter-realities, and ultra-futurities. [http://www.morehshin.com/3d\\_additivist\\_cookbook/](http://www.morehshin.com/3d_additivist_cookbook/)

<sup>53</sup> Allahyari, M. (2019). “She Who Sees the Unknown, ‘About.’” Retrieved from [shewhoseestheunknown.com/about/](http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/about/).

alter, decolonial political geography. Although their representations in some depictions are not always gendered, the direct countering of masculinist projections of jinns presses a feminist practice into the face of so many anthropological colonialist projects and theorizations. The technology of 3D scanning and printing is also used in colonial anthropological projects that claim to recreate destroyed artifacts and “conserve,” essentially reclaiming (which usually also involves claiming rights) and extracting, the artefacts (Allahyari’s earlier, also brilliant, work delves into this analytic work explicitly: *Material Speculation: ISIS 2015-2016*<sup>54</sup>). The “manufactured amnesia” that Tabita Rezaire references in her piece is the same colonial streak that Allahyari also follows in her work. The interpretive artistic critique and theorizations offered by Rezaire and Allahyari decenter amnestic, prescriptive histories and in turn articulate post-colonial counterhistories in their fabulation of stories & memories and through their use of technologies as acts of “cyber-resistance.”

The jinns depicted are already cyborgian in their affects and capabilities, inhabiting “ubiquity and invisibility... deadly... as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness — or its simulation.” (Haraway 1991, 153), or, as described by Allahyari:

“When jinn possess humans, they guarantee an utter openness. A new kind of entrance, portal, and arrival to the outside. For me, this is what makes them attractive candidates for an act of Re-Figuring” (Allahyari 2019)<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Allahyari, M. (2019). “Material Speculation: ISIS (2015-2016).” Retrieved from <http://www.morehshin.com/material-speculation-isis/>.

<sup>55</sup> Allahyari, M. (2019). “She Who Sees the Unknown.” Retrieved from <http://shewhoseestheunknown.com/>.

One of the jinns depicted, Huma, is cited as being responsible for the common fever or producing an internal high temperature. In describing her power, Allahyari describes, “the heat she brings to the body is a symptom of an underlying condition; not a condition itself... She is the site of the warm globe and the slowly burning human,” (*She Who Sees the Unknown: Huma*). Another figure in the series, The Laughing Snake, involves an online participatory hypertext narrative (which was the form that I accessed for use in this essay) that tells the story of a jinn responsible for the desecration of the land, one finds that the only way to kill her is to hold a mirror in front of her—her demise is her laughter at her reflection until she self-destructs. The hypertext narrative offers a multitude of options to click through for the narrative of the laughing snake, and includes Allahyari’s own memories and stories, it is a speculative retelling of a responsibility for self-destruction and crisis; and articulates memory anachronistically, offering multitemporal realities/futures/pasts.

The rendered figure of the jinns “Re-figured” by Allahyari could also be read as assemblages (in Deleuzian or Guattarian<sup>56</sup> terms but further expounded upon in Jasbir Puar’s work *Terrorist Assemblages*<sup>57</sup> and “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”<sup>58</sup>), not only because of the fact that it is a technologically rendered figure from research and recreating of the occult but also as a new signification for capacity

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<sup>56</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) describes assemblage theory and includes the first mention of it in their work.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.

<sup>57</sup> Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Puar, J. K. (2012). "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory. *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism*, 2(1). 49-66.

of meaning in the practice of anticolonial cultural resistance. In Puar's essay on "Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," she notes that "assemblages encompass not only ongoing attempts to destabilize identities and grids, but also the forces that continue to mandate and enforce them" (Puar, 2012, 63). Referring back to Puar's seminal *Terrorist Assemblages*, the imaginative geographies of the US that shape its forms of nationalism also exist globally in the age of counter-terrorism and unify to be against a Deviant<sup>59</sup>, Oriental, and/or "External-Muslim-Other" (Puar 2006)<sup>60</sup>. The queered jinns of *She Who Sees the Unknown* are the contestations of "the Orient and Islam [that] are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe [...] at one and the same time [characterizing] the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are for Europe..." (Said, 1979, 72). Further, the position that the jinns occupy brings into the present the histories of colonialism, reimagining them, contesting them, and transforming them (Gopinath, 2005, 4), as Gayatri Gopinath says of the queer diaspora in *Impossible Desires*<sup>61</sup>. The incorporation of technology, mysticism, deviancy, and archive is a practice of deconstructing and decentralizing a cultural legacy of violence and superimposes the amnestic archive.

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<sup>59</sup> The concept of Deviancy from Cathy Cohen's (very) salient writing on "Deviance as Resistance." Cohen, C. J. (2004). "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study Of Black Politics." *WEB Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research*, 1(1), 27-43. doi:10.1017/S1742058X04040044.

<sup>60</sup> Puar, J. K. (2006). "Mapping US Homonormativities." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 13(1). 67-8.

<sup>61</sup> Gopinath, G. (2005). "1: An Introduction." In *Impossible Desires*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.

The sort of speculative retelling of jinns that Allahyari conjures in her work is not the same as colonialist “specular” literature<sup>62</sup>, that Abdul R. Janmohamed critiques in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory” and much less in terms of Jinny Huh’s analysis of speculative racializing in biotechnologies<sup>63</sup>. When juxtaposing new narratives with mysticism, “additivism<sup>64</sup>,” and poetics like that of Allahyari’s, they become speculative in the sense that they traverse beyond a Manichean, reifying duality (specifically in reference to Orientalism) and function as part of decolonial cultural resistances as Edward Said lays out in his essay “Resistance, Opposition and Representation.” Said references “three topics emerging in decolonizing cultural resistance:” 1. “... the instance... to see the community’s history whole, coherently, integrally...” 2. “... the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history...” and 3. “ a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation” (Said, 2006, 97)<sup>65</sup>. The counter-discursive and “peripheral subversion” (Tiffin, 2006, 99<sup>66</sup>) of hegemonic archival practices

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<sup>62</sup> “[Colonialist] literature is essentially specular: instead of seeing the native as a bride toward syncretic possibility, it uses him as a mirror that reflects the colonialist’s self-image” (Janmohamed, 2006, 18).

Janmohamed, A.R. (2006). “The Economy of Manichean Allegory.” In Ashcroft, B.; Griffiths, G.; and Tiffin, H. (Eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London; New York: Routledge.

<sup>63</sup> Huh, J.; Roh, D.; Huang, B.; Niu, G. (2015). “(Bio)technology, *Battlestar*, *Galactica*, and a Mixed-Race Imagining.” *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media [monograph on the Internet]*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>64</sup> See footnote 45.

<sup>65</sup> Said, E. (2006). “Resistance, Opposition, and Representation.” In Ashcroft, B.; Griffiths, G.; and Tiffin, H. (Eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 95-98.. London; New York: Routledge.

<sup>66</sup> Tiffin, H. (2006). “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse.” In Ashcroft, B.; Griffiths, G.; and Tiffin, H. (Eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 99-102. London; New York: Routledge.

(whether it be the destruction of certain ones or the withholding of them) is in Allahyari's use of technology to generate and reconstruct artifacts and histories that are destroyed through processes of violence perpetuated, and sanctioned, by present colonial iterations. The "peripheral subversion" is also marked through Allahyari's research and archival intentions in the process of creating an archive for it all because a near comprehensive one doesn't exist. The "Re-figuring" of narratives and images produces an alternative way of creating archives outside of the narrative of hegemonic archival storage. Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>67</sup> is once again relevant: the archive that Allahyari manufactures through the narrative, renderings, and object-forms of jinns "differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration" (Foucault, 1972, 146). The "statements" here are the stories of the jinns with Allahyari's personal additives and their presentations (virtual, incomplete rendering, or 3D printed object). *She Who Sees the Unknown* creates an archive of counterdiscourse for the use of technology, colonialism, Orientalism, and new materialism. The fabulation of an "additivist" feminist Islamic narrative as new is an anachronistic approach to technological use.

Allahyari's use of technology like 3D printing ("pushing it to its limits) and mysticism to fabulate—"Re-figure"—alter-narratives (of past, present, and future) and to generate archives replace hegemonic historical memory with anachronistic temporalities of anticolonial relations. The anticolonial work of archiving and

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<sup>67</sup> Foucault, M., Sheridan, A. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London; New York: Routledge.

narrativization is “embodied” through the jinns, their deviance, their relationality, and their manifestations.

## **Conclusion**

The virtual is far from immaterial and its expressions are multifarious. Technological globalism has created pathways of violence & fraught foundations while agents, like Tabita Rezaire and Morehshin Allahyari, of radical technofeminist and new materialist practice have generated counterdiscourses in the face of the globalized interfaces of technology. The circulation of images, narratives, histories, etc. that such globalized interfaces enables is part in parcel of the iteration of neocolonialism, late capitalism, and cybernetic culture. The artists and their work that I engaged with in this essay are examples of the practice of counter-narratives for archive and resistance. Whether through the use of technological mechanisms, archival narrative practice, or memory re-calibration (to name only a few) their work is anticolonial in its countering of power and hegemonic imaginations. These productions are not just limited to fabulations or aestheticised interfacing, they interrogate the ontology of technology its possibilities and placements, and challenge global western hegemony while indicting the ongoing processes of colonialism.

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