ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies

Ta'ārof as a Baggage and Gift for Crossing White Ontologies

Zeinab Karimi

University of Helsinki
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9317-7064
zeinab.karimi@helsinki.fi

Kolar Aparna

University of Helsinki
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8152-9990
kolar.aparna@helsinki.fi

Abstract

In this paper, we analyse our own bodily experiences in everyday interactions in relation as scholars and women of colour in Europe. We aim to build on ta'ārof (تعارف) as an ontological and epistemological standpoint to situate our bodily experiences. We follow encounters and experiences where ta'ārof is both a gift with the potential for unsettling whiteness and a baggage that settles as sediments feeding racial hierarchies in the contact zone of academic encounters. We closely analyse different ways in which ta'ārof was performed in forms of hospitality, gratitude, respect, and self-breaking, and situate it in relation to asymmetries of racial encounters in academia. The inability to understand the knowledges around ta'ārof did not put the white gaze in an inferior position. Instead, the ontological blindness was translated to reproduce the orientalist gaze by positioning us primarily as informants, thereby denying our epistemic authority. The paper invites the reader to reflect on the politics and ethics of academic knowledge production through the standpoint of ta'ārof, especially in the spaces of the classroom, fieldwork, and formal and informal interactions of Knowing.

Published with Creative Commons licence: Attribution–Noncommercial–No Derivatives

Keywords
ta'ārof, everyday academia, white ontology, contact zone

Introduction: Hosting Whiteness in Everyday Academic Encounters

Many working in academia and speaking to a researcher returning from "the field", especially from the global south or after fieldwork with "marginalised groups," have heard the phrase: "They were so hospitable to me." This can be in reference to various uneven encounters in the plural contexts of fieldwork practices. However, we want to pause for a moment on this mode of "receiving hospitality" and urge the reader to reflect on how academic knowledge production relies deeply on the hospitality of some to share their stories, homes, foods, experiences, contexts, and bodies, on which theories are built. At the same time, even within academic spaces, this dynamic requires attention: some bodies offer hospitality with the intention of reciprocity, while others take with a sense of entitlement or receive from a place of ontological blindness. These unequal power relations, we argue, need attention. We bring our own embodied knowledges and experiences to analyse the everyday power relations in micro interactions at the heart of academic knowledge production. This makes visible the embodied ways of Knowing[1] that whiteness performs in the more mundane and less spectacular forms, what we refer to as white ontologies (Ahmed 2007; Ferreira da Silva 2016). Such ways of Knowing, which we will address in this paper, rely on the hospitality of bodies and knowledges that are constantly read to recentre whiteness. Instead of focusing on the "research field" out there, we use our own bodily experiences as racialised scholars to point at these extractive ontologies in which knowledge production sustains itself. With this, we urge the reader to reflect on how academic knowledge production relies deeply on the hospitality of some on which theories are built. Ironically, it has also been argued that immigrants are the "guests" of a postcolonial condition in Europe, always seen as symbolising a burden of "welcoming" and hospitality framed by state narratives (Rosello 2001). Here, the spatiality of hosting does not have a clear boundary between academic and non-academic spaces but is constantly made and unmade in everyday interactions, demarcating bodies of expertise versus data (Suhonić forthcoming; El-Tayeb 2011). This uneven space where knowledges and bodies are demarcated as experts versus objects of study, argued as coloniality of being in academia, is what we build on (Wynter 2003; Maldonado-Torres 2007). We argue that even when racialised bodies enter academic spaces, they continue to be subjected to uneven forms of hospitality, where the labour of hosting falls disproportionately on them.

We use the concept of ta'ārof to examine the complexities of hospitality in academic settings and to analyse our experiences. Ta'ārof, through Pratt's (1992) framework of the contact zone, helps us situate such invisible power relations within seemingly inclusive spaces, repositioning them as a way of sensing relationality from colonial difference. This allows us to further reveal how the coloniality of power, as discussed by María Lugones (2008), unfolds within the realm of academic knowledge production. Coloniality of power, as defined by Lugones, is the ongoing process through which the power structures born of colonialism

[1] The use of a capital "K" highlights dominant epistemological frameworks that construct the Other as both an object and a commodity, which are central to European scholarly investigation.

continue to classify and control people through intersecting hierarchies of race and gender, sustaining domination and oppression.

This paper emerged from a moment when we, the authors, confronted and shared our pain and frustration—emotions that had long been dismissed, internalised, kept private and unconceptualised. In this paper, we share and centre our own bodily experiences as part of overlapping racial structures of academia in developing our conceptual arguments around the notion of ta'ārof, and we translate it (not only literally but also as an onto-epistemic position) into the contact zones of everyday ways of being and relating in academia. This allows us to develop tools for holding space for each other. Simultaneously, it allows us to become aware of our own complicity and participation, as racial hierarchies feed off such "value systems" and ways of being (i.e. ta'ārof) that we carry as bodies in relation. This text is our coming together, holding space for our knowledges and being led by ta'ārof as a spatial practice where one does not overwrite the other, without giving up difference (Ferreira Da Silva 2016).

The text begins by presenting the contextual aspect as well as the onto-epistemological standpoint of ta'ārof in relation to the notion of the contact zone. Building on the argument, the text is structured around different situations emerging when ta'ārof wrestles with whiteness. This allows the reader to better understand the spatial dynamics of the racial gaze in different contexts when academic knowledge claims are made and remade. Finally, the discussion is where we reflect on the commonality of the different themes and invite the reader to situate themselves and their bodily experiences in performing, feeding racial structures of academia, alongside the potential of ta'ārof in provincialising whiteness as not the only way of knowing in everyday encounters (Chakrabarty 2000).

Re-fusing Ta'ārof in Academic Contact Zones

Ta'ārof (تعارف), according to the Dehkhoda dictionary (1931), is defined as "introducing and greeting". However, ta'ārof is a complex, sophisticated and situational form of interaction, making it difficult to propose a simple definition for it. Ta'ārof is primarily studied through an Orientalist lens and has been defined as a "ritual courtesy" (Beeman 1986, 56) or an "Iranian system of politeness" (Yaqubi 2021, 2018). Overall, it is understood as a form of interaction, and we claim it in this paper as an onto-epistemological standpoint, performed in a range of social encounters that produces its own spatiality. "Depending on the circumstance, it can mean any number of things: to offer, to compliment, to exchange pleasantries, and/or to invite" (Eslami 2005, 456). In other words, ta'ārof has been referred to as an inhabited form of interaction that reflects on moral order, encouraging recognition of the other even when used as the literal language of refusal (also see Izadi 2015; Koutlaki 2010; Yaqubi 2018, 2021). This recognition embedded in ta'ārof practice takes different forms such as مهمان نوازی (hospitality), شکسته نفسی (self-breaking), احترام (respect), and, more importantly, قدردانی (gratitude) (e.g., see Izadi 2015; Sharifian 2011; Yaqubi 2018). One main principle of ta'ārof in all these definitions is to lead the conversation in a way that provides space for the other person in the interaction. However, as a shared knowledge, both sides do not abuse the space they are given by each other. In other words, inhabiting ta'ārof allows both sides to acknowledge, accept and reject each other's offerings in ways that maintain a careful balance of power between them.

Despite its strong positive connotation and widespread practice, ta'ārof has also been criticised. Ta'ārof is also seen as a barrier to achieving a goal, as the process becomes less

relevant in modern times. In other words, it makes social interaction more laboured. Ta'ārof is additionally criticised for being insincere at times when used to cover up what one really wishes to say or even contradicting one's intention (Afghari and Karimnia 2012; Eslami 2005; Koutlaki 2002; Yaqubi 2021). One can claim that ta'ārof may reinforce hierarchies in terms of gender and class. Nonetheless, the continuous use of the term highlights relationalities shaped in everyday interactions, relationalities that persist and remain vital, even as they unfold despite and against enduring hierarchies.

For us, ta'ārof is an onto-epistemological standpoint (Harding 2010; Mohanty 2003) that entails a relational space of navigation, spontaneously and mutually negotiated by social actors, despite and within power asymmetries. This attention to the spatial and relational aspects of social life leaves room for power asymmetries to crystallise or even to be temporarily suspended. Such crystallisation or suspension of power asymmetries occurs in that space of navigating mutual intentions in the process of moving towards different or shared goals, often not fixed beforehand. We problematise the Orientalist definitions of ta'ārof, understood as fixed social codes to understand the Orient, and instead reposition it as an ontological and epistemological claim. We do this with the intention of making visible the everyday embodied interactions that sustain the positions of the knower and the Orient as part of the racial complex in academia (Ferreira Da Silva 2014; Said 1978; Spivak 1988). The Orientalist gaze, entangled in colonial epistemologies, constructs racialised subjects and their cultures as intelligible and manageable within Western frameworks, while simultaneously denying them epistemic agency and reducing their ways of knowing to objects of extraction and control (Said 1978; Spivak 1988). Rather than totally rejecting ta'ārof as an Orientalist category, we reclaim and re-fuse it with a postcolonial sensibility that is urgently needed to unpack micro-guises of everyday racism in academic encounters.

Here, Mary Louis Pratt's (1992) notion of the contact zone, despite being written in the 90s in the context of the North American academy, resonates with our approach to ta'ārof as a space of navigation. Such a lens is fully aware of reclaiming colonial categories of representations and is sensitive to highly asymmetrical relations of power. Pratt uses the term contact zone to refer to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1992, 3). For Pratt, the contact zone is, on the one hand, a tool to demonstrate the complexity of this process of encountering, clashing, and grappling under conditions of asymmetrical relations of power; and, on the other hand, a means to problematise models of community, culture, and society as fixed. In situating ta'ārof in academic contact zones, we can then bring attention to the processual and contextual micro-interactions that produce uneven hierarchies in constantly shifting settings, rather than treating categories of race, gender, class, etc., as fixed and static. In these micro-interactions of the contact zone, the perception of self and others is in flux and unfixed (Cooper 2004) yet is continuously affected by the oppressive structures we all carry.

Furthermore, by choosing the method of (collaborative) autoethnography, we call attention to the entanglement of the politics of representation beyond the coloniser/colonised binary. This relational knowledge practice allowed us to see the possibility of knowing otherwise. As Pratt points out, "Autoethnographic texts are not then what are usually thought of as autochthonous forms of expression or self-representation...

Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror" (Pratt 1992, 3). We enact this selective collaboration and appropriation of ta'ārof as an ethnographic concept by re-fusing it with its potential to not only visibilise and resist power asymmetries in relation to whiteness and its ways of Knowing (Glissant 1997) but also to practice writing in relation, as called for by third world feminisms (Mohanty 2003). We do not claim to save the notion of ta'ārof from the western gaze to provide "indigenous" or "local self-representative" accounts. Rather, we point to how this embodied spatial value and practice system is exploited and made essential to the persistence of racial hierarchies in academia. This re-fusal allows us to turn the gaze to "the colonial modalities of Knowing" (Gross, Masherghi and Söderman 2023) and into how academia feeds-off of ta'ārof.

The intention of ta'ārof in this paper is not to offer a phenomenological definition of ta'ārof or its rules, but to show how the authors inhabit this knowledge system by continually crossing boundaries and unwritten rules while navigating racial structures in academia in Europe. We employ ta'ārof as not strictly attached to specific fixed geographies but as a relational bodily experience. We reappropriate and reclaim the Orientalist view of ta'ārof to invert the gaze and reveal how White structures are unevenly re-built upon such embodied spatial practices carried by certain bodies.

In the contact zone, ta'ārof offers space, and at the same time, we argue, the privileged does not always move away from its own privileged position. As Pratt notes, the dominant ones understand and engage with their own position of power. However, how these power dynamics unfold when ta'ārof is practised, received or not, and reciprocated or not, also shape-shift in specific contexts. In what follows, we situate and analyse our lived experiences of ta'ārof in academic contact zones. Here, it is important to note that we adopt a mode of writing for the right to opacity (Glissant 1997). Rather than revealing details of our personal lives to a gaze demanding transparency (for instance, to determine which story belongs to which author), we have practised a mode of rewriting and rereading our experiences to name the power asymmetries in the situations we found ourselves in (Hamzah and Aparna 2024). Here, writing in relation therefore becomes a liberatory practice to name what was otherwise not nameable to us (hooks 1991).

Aula as a Space of Defending Margins as a Space of Radical Openness

It is the day of the defence of my PhD. It is also the peak of the pandemic period. The Aula is empty. My defence committee is half online and half in person. My audience is limited to a restricted guest list to be seated at a distance. The person timing the defence tells us that a prayer will be recited in Latin to thank the university for the enlightenment. My thesis, titled "Enacting Asylum University", was a practice of reclaiming the space of the classroom and relations with people in the refugee camp close to the university campus and people waiting for their (asylum) citizenship as a space of theory building. I could not stand there to take the oath of European Enlightenment, though it was demanded from my body to do so. Instead of centring myself as the holder of the knowledge, I turned my speech to centre the knowledges we had built in relation, that were otherwise not welcome to the threshold of the university. The self-breaking becomes essential here to not fall into the trap of performing the Enlightened expert (whiteness) demanded of bodies entering the space of the Aula to defend one's thesis to earn a doctorate. While شکسته نفسی (self-breaking) is understood as a motivation

for downplaying one's own talent, skill, achievement, etc. (Sharifian 2005, 337), when enacted in the space of the Aula, it enables the breaking of the Self as the colonising mentality and such ways of Knowing (Ferreira Da Silva 2007) demanded in the colonial university. My speech was a practice of ta'ārof, performed through refusing to centre my Self and instead inviting everyone present to speak and think with the knowledges and the absences present in the thesis and in the defence space. I did it to detach myself from the sole goal of getting a title based on individual merit measured against one's capacity to build arguments analysing stories and knowledges often extracted and mined. I did it to make visible the relational epistemology central to building knowledges not given space in the moment of the defence. This clearly set the tone of the defence to be very different to the norms I had previously witnessed. I was not sure how my committee would respond or receive this gesture of ta'ārof.

The first member entered on the screen, beaming with a big smile. I could feel the resonance through the screen. He posed a question on one of the chapters that connected to his work, but most importantly, he did not stop smiling. His gaze was soft and loving, neither asserting his position of power nor carrying the weight of interrogation or condescension. We moved to the next member. He entered the screen and said, "I had prepared a question on how you use borders in your thesis. But after listening to your speech, I decided to drop my question. I will speak instead as a racialised subject myself in academia. It was a moment when all the hierarchies seemed to dissolve and we saw each other from that colonial difference, from the wounds and joys we have had in moving, in holding our space in the European Aula. In the contact zone between my second opponent and me, my performance/speech was not overlooked as something to brush aside or understood as an inability to defend in an "academically sound" manner. In a space of White academia, the gesture of downplaying one's talents is often interpreted as being intellectually weak or as an inferior position. However, my second opponent did not reproduce this white gaze but instead reciprocated my performance of self-breaking in relation to my PhD thesis. Later, many people who were watching the defence online told me that they cried during this exchange because they were moved by this reciprocal way of navigating a defence without giving up on our capacities for inquiry and accountability. This was the power of ta'ārof when the receiver put oneself away from the privileged position and reciprocated the gesture to think with one's own experiences and vulnerabilities to question the power asymmetries in Knowing. In this case, ta'ārof was not experienced as baggage but a tool–and gift –to crack the space of the Aula and its historically embedded hierarchies, allowing for a defence encounter to question the same.

I also remember sensing a gaze during the same defence, one of an innocent confusion – a look feeling entitled to publicly show confusion on the stage. A look that was saying "I am lost, this is not academically sound". A restless presence unable to participate in the openness being enacted in a space otherwise scripted for bodies to enact whiteness in hierarchies of external markers (such as gowns assigned to full professors) attached to prestige, but also an embodiment of expertise. This gaze was unable to comprehend theory building as relational and not as an exercise of capture, grasping and occupation to centre oneself (Glissant 1997). This member was wearing the academic gown that made this gaze even more spectacular and symbolic. The gown symbolised the hierarchy of the title and position that felt entitled to occupy the space with its gaze. The gaze kept moving as if searching for something familiar to settle on, to put oneself as the one legitimising these

exchanges, but was currently lost in being unable to do so. The gaze has the privilege to observe the space of recognition and hospitality without inhabiting it.

Racialised Body as Fieldwork: Labour of Explaining

As one of my first encounters upon starting my new job in the department, I received a request to help another researcher who wanted to study Muslim communities. The colleague showed interest in my previous research and hoped our conversation would help provide some "orientation" to the fieldwork and "become more familiar with the subject". Despite not knowing the person, I agreed to help. We met, and my new colleague talked about one's own insecurity around entering the field and around formulating a research question. I put all my energy into hosting her/his needs. The discussion primarily revolved around my understanding of relevant issues in the fieldwork and the consideration of possible research questions. Our conversation was almost over, and my colleague said, "Thank you for your participation. I took note of what you said and will get back to you if something was unclear". "What did she just say?" I thought. "Was I her research participant?". I had difficulty confronting the approach because من با او تعارف داشتم. Engaging with the practices of ta'ārof, I didn't want to make him/her feel uncomfortable, and I intentionally wanted to downplay the intellectual favour. I calmed myself by assuming it was just a wrong choice of words, but I left the meeting feeling uneasy.

The following day, I received an email from my colleague thanking me and asking if I am open to "participating" in the research and continuing the conversation from the last meeting. I was shocked by the email. I might not have minded being interviewed if I had been informed about it. Not only was there no informed consent, but my identity was also assumed rather than discussed. Our conversation was academic, and I was unaware that I was serving as her informant. My frustration surfaced (Ahmed 2014), revealing how being viewed as a racialised subject *sticks* to my body through meanings that position me as an Orient.

Upon my arrival at the department, I was assigned the role of a host, tasked with accommodating my colleague's academic gaze. This academic gaze did not even acknowledge being hosted or receiving any intellectual discussion. Instead, it inserted its gaze as the Knower or the one having the authority to Know, even in the absence of informed consent. My knowledge of the field was not acknowledged in the email; instead, I was thanked for "our conversation" and invited to "participate" again. I was positioned as an Orient, with my knowledge being recognised only to the extent that I could serve as an object of study (Said 1978).

I still replied politely and expressed, "I am not exactly sure what you mean by "participating", expecting that I would receive clarification. However, I did not receive a response. It left me feeling exploited for being informative about my communities. I was expected to do so, and I did exactly as I was expected. I was mad at myself because I participated in keeping the dominant racial order – a clear example of the *coloniality of power*, where racial hierarchies are maintained not only through institutions, but also through the internalised expectations and behaviours of those positioned as Other within those structures (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Karimi forthcoming). The incident kept stimulating my emotions and thoughts: "Is it so that hospitality made colonisation successful, including Orientalism?", I asked myself.

Who is the host and who is the guest in the face of knowledge production? Who runs with the knowledge and claims the ownership? In this context, the positions of host and guest differ from those described by Rosello (2002). I performed hospitality in an informative way. However, my hospitality was not interpreted as my scholarly ability and my sharing of knowledge, but as an informant who needed to be known by the privileged and in need of representation (Said 1978; Spivak 1988). The hospitality fed into the reproduction of the Orient and the subaltern subject, figures who are constructed to be known, spoken for, and represented by the privileged. I become the translator and mediator for my colleague's White knowledge on being subjected to the gaze. This dynamic reflects Pratt's notion of the contact zone as a site of unequal cultural exchange, where marginalised individuals often navigate imposed roles such as informants or cultural brokers. Rather than a space of equal dialogue, the contact zone here becomes a terrain where power hierarchies are reproduced through the control of knowledge and representation.

The contact zone is a fundamentally ambiguous site (Pratt 1992). I was upset with the position that I was put in by my colleague. Ta'ārof here was baggage that first opened the space for exploitation and secondly remained a barrier to confronting my colleague's epistemological perspective. The interaction was incidental in relation to the power structure. Although critical scholarship acknowledges structures of whiteness and non-recognition, they reflect less on the labour and hospitality that racialised scholars undergo, which feeds the systems (also see Karimi 2024). All these terminologies and accounts of outsider, stranger, un-homed, homelessness, out of place, unrecognised and discomforting body experiences (Ahmed 2012; Farahani 2015; Ghorashi 2005; Puwar 2002; Said 1999), do not fully provide a nuanced systemic analysis of how the engine of academia relies on certain behaviours, knowledges, and practices, in this case shared through ta'ārofing. Although scholars such as Audre Lorde (1979) reflect on the bodily experience of racism in academia and the devaluation of non-white knowledges and experiences, conceptualising this narrative additionally reveals how academia not only misrecognises these knowledges but also relies upon them—and the forms of hospitality that accompany them—to sustain racial dominance.

Stories Our Eyes/Works Tell Each Other and the White Gaze

It was a very difficult day, and I was looking for an escape. I was exhausted from reading all the news, and I decided to leave work early and go to my friend's exhibition. The exhibition space was large, with high ceilings, but was warmed by the many colours of the art pieces hanging on the walls. She greeted me and started to show me her artworks. As we were talking, a group of academic acquaintances from the University showed up in the gallery. My friend greeted them as well and started introducing the artworks to all of us. I felt a sense of belonging and ease within the gallery—partly due to the hospitality extended by my friend and partly because the artworks, predominantly created by artists from the SWANA region, engaged deeply with the intertwined struggles of gender and the coloniality of power (Lugones 2010).

After a short while, my friend had to leave urgently and asked me to introduce the artworks, directing our attention to the handcrafted pieces from Iran and Iraq displayed on the wall. I immediately felt uneasy as I was unprepared to address the audience, having never visited the gallery before, and lacking an informed artistic perspective. In that encounter, everyone's eyes shifted toward me. Looking back at myself, I don't know how I managed to

shift my mood so quickly to keep the visitors comfortable. Suddenly, they became my guests, and I became their host. In the blink of an eye, مهمانانم را تعارف کردم که به آنها تاریخ بی پایان درد و عشق که با دستان هنرمندانی که نامشان را نمیدانستم اما هم دردشان بوده ام را نشان دهم. (I ta'ārofed my guests to show them the endless history of pain and love narrated by the artists whom I did not know by name but knew through their pain narrated in their art). I translated the text written on each blanket and carpet. I kept smiling as much as I could despite having a very difficult day. While moving from one art piece to another, I sensed a gaze which demanded to Know while finding it difficult to understand the artworks. The gaze signalled not only not Knowing the art works but also that my explanation was not good enough to satisfy this urge to Know. This made me even more uncomfortable and made me question my ability to satisfy this need of my guest. This gaze made my body feel like becoming part of the artworks, both of which were rendered illegible to the gaze. Surprisingly, I kept going and continued with a smile on my face. Finally, my friend arrived and took back the hosting role, and I was relieved and happy to be served by her hospitality, but the gaze was still present, as I felt like an integral part of the exhibition—an object being looked upon. In the end, I was left feeling like an unappreciated host and even more exhausted than when I came.

My experience encompassed several role shifts, each shaping a different contact zone. At first, I was received as a guest. My friend's ta'ārof made me immediately feel *at home*. The art pieces also contributed to my feeling of being at home as I could relate to them through shared histories and knowledges. The emotional aspect of being at home is shaped in relation (Ahmed 2014; Karimi 2024), and here, ta'ārofing reinforced the guest's (my) belonging. My friend also saw me at home more than the others, so she asked me to become the host and make others feel comfortable in her absence. This is the continuously shifting roles of hospitality in ta'ārofing of making someone at home, especially in situations that they are least familiar with. The expectation of making someone feel at home is embodying ta'ārof as an episteme. In addition, the demand of the white gaze to be hosted through becoming Knowable is connected to the accumulation of a historical relationship between someone outside of epistemic whiteness and someone inside, in that encounter (Ahmed 2000, 2007; Aparna et al. 2017; Karimi 2024; Wekker 2020).

By hosting the silence and the gaze, my feelings shifted from being comfortable at home to uncomfortable at home. In the gallery, other audiences travelled through the artworks as my body became the transitory guide: I was fixed, but the guests were travelling through the comfort that ta'ārof provided them. Mobility for them was a privilege achievable through visiting the gallery and exploring the Other's world: acquiring knowledge about the Other as well as exercising mobility and freedom (Pratt 1992). All these were achieved by taking advantage of ta'ārof. The contact zone is the border area (Lomnitz 2001) where Others' bodies are seen as merely a host upon their arrival. The third shift finally happened when my friend returned and took the hosting role back. I returned to the guest role and was not bound to serving the guests.

The Classroom as a Space of Measurement

I was coordinating a first-year bachelor's course. It was one of the first courses in the first semester that first-year students fresh out of school were to be taking upon entering the University. I was co-teaching it with another Professor in Urban Planning and a Professor in Environment. We had split the lectures, assignments, and exam questions along the lines of

our disciplines, while I was doing the coordination for the whole course. Each of us introduced the syllabus and our lectures in the first session. I was teaching in a space where hierarchical roles were fixed and even visible in the arrangements – rows of chairs, one behind the other, fixed to gaze at the central lecture hall below, where the lecturer presents or deposits the grand theories (Freire 1970). In every session, I planned discussion moments with students, believing that even in the first-year introductory courses, it is important to work with the knowledges that learners bring, rather than erasing them to fit into the university's established vocabularies and frames. This was performed to احترام (respect) the autonomy of learners, to situate their lived experiences as legitimate. This connects to the practice of ta'ārof as defined by Izadi (2015, 83), "showing awareness of self and other's territory of individuality, autonomy, privacy, differentiation, independence and the like".

In one of the sessions about forced migration, I displayed the definition of forced migration mentioned in the textbook and opened it up for discussion. I asked, "What is missing in this definition?". There was a long silence. There was discomfort. I waited. I was used to measuring the many shades of silences in the European academic classroom. After some time, the only student of colour raised her hand and hesitantly asked, "Does slavery qualify as forced migration?". By raising this question, she not only stepped out of the dominant position of the learner as receiver of knowledge that all other students were performing, but she also connected to the question from her position and lived experiences as a student of colour, which was silenced in the textbook prescribed for this course. Through that gesture of respect, a space was claimed for such a critical question to be posed, opening up a space of theorising such absences in the textbook. An absence that renders the conceptualisation of forced migration as separate from coloniality of power.

However, this ta'ārofing of making the student's knowledge at home was received unevenly, as reflected in some of the student feedback:

> "*Please provide a better lecturer in geography*"
>
> *"She wants too much interaction."*
>
> *"She cannot keep order"*
>
> *"Do not use big chunks of text, work on the readability and connection. Look for instance the slides of XX professor from planning"*

Although ta'ārof opened the space for theory building from lived experiences made absent in the national curriculum, at the same time, it made me wonder if the dominant ways of Knowing remained unsettled despite the labour of ta'ārofing. The space was abused and not reciprocated, especially the last comment that measured me against the White Male professor.

Shifting Embodiment of Class

My colleague and I had a prolonged discussion after a seminar. In the end, I said I really appreciated the time and was sorry for taking up so much of it. I remember repeating my apology two times, knowing that I initiated the long conversation. I was engaged in the ritual of ta'ārof to show my appreciation and gratitude for the space we had made. My colleague kindly said that I don't need to apologise but then continued with something unsettling: "usually the working class inhabit apologising". Then my colleague gave me another example

of a friend from Iran who also "apologises a lot". I was really taken aback by the statement. The statement made me question my act of apologising and try to understand why I did so and why I was uncomfortable with my colleague's comment. I also wondered how others typically perceived my ta'ārof apology in the academic contact zone.

Ta'ārof apologies, defined as "apologies which are extended to show politeness" (Yaqubi 2018, 31) are noted to create obstacles in cross-cultural communication and translations (from Persian to English) (Yaqubi 2018, 31; also see Koutlaki 2010). Apologising is used to show gratitude when no offence has occurred (for example, a guest's apology for troubling the host, according to Saberi 2012). Such difficulty is recognised by scholars in cultural and linguistic pragmatic studies as "misunderstanding" or "difficulty in translation" (Koutlaki 2010; Taleghani-Nikazm 1998; Yaqubi 2012, 2018; Yaqubi et al. 2013). However, there is a lack of analysis that unpacks the power dynamics involved in the contact zone, where ta'ārof apologies are read in ways that reproduce racial hierarchies. My colleague did not step away from his/her position of power as a scholar studying the Other. That position of not knowing did not entail epistemic vulnerability on my colleague's part. Rather than receiving my apology as belonging to a system of knowledge of its own carried and passing through my body, the colleague situated it into the White epistemology in which class identity is visible and predetermined (Spivak 1988), in this case, within apology. This raises the question of how quickly certain bodily gestures are read within an Orientalist frame and White epistemology that emerges from and sustains Eurocentric, colonial worldviews (Said 1978). By comparing my apology with another racialised person, my colleague got to Know how an "Iranian apology" looks like and read it as a marker of working class identity. This conclusion was reached despite both of us holding equivalent academic positions, while my racialised position rendered me as classed lower relative to my white colleague.

Conclusion: Ta'ārofing in the Academic Contact Zones

In this paper, we closely analyse how ta'ārofing is performed and received by our bodies in relation to racial structures. The analytical vignettes show how ta'ārof in relation to the white gaze travels in the spaces of the classroom, fieldwork, Aula, informal interactions, academic collaboration, etc. They draw attention to daily asymmetric micro relations that rely on ta'ārof in those spaces. We have intentionally made visible the racial gaze and its embodiments of Knowing. Focusing on the context of academia, we argue that the white gaze installs itself as a permanent and extractive guest. Racialised bodies are either compelled to host this gaze continuously—offering knowledge, hospitality, and stories without reciprocity—or to become complicit in enacting this way of Knowing as a means of reproducing whiteness and its racial hierarchies.

While we build on the scholarship of phenomenology of whiteness (Ahmed 2007, 2000), we also draw attention to the phenomenology of colonised bodies that the former relies on. Ta'ārof should not be decontextualised and viewed as an isolated practice but connected to the historical accumulation of knowledges, not aligned but essential for the white gaze. However, the purpose is not to offer an innovative concept but for theorising as a liberatory practice (hooks 1991) to reread, revisit and rewrite our experiences to conceptualise the different ways in which whiteness performs as an embodied way of Knowing.

We analysed different ways in which ta'ārof was performed in forms of hospitality, gratitude, respect and self-breaking, and situated it in relation to asymmetries of racial encounters. Ta'ārofing and offering knowledges in the white structure did not put the white gaze in an inferior position. Instead, it was read in ways that sustain colonising mentalities and ways of Knowing: no self-breaking, no apologising, demanding to be hosted, standardising and normalising the order of the classroom through embodiment of hierarchies of expertise that assert rather than reciprocate. Whiteness emerges as the incapacity to read knowledges outside the Known categories of epistemic supremacy, rendering the bodies hosting its gaze into objects while nevertheless demanding the labour of explaining (Karimi forthcoming). Ta'ārofing as a practice of hospitality becomes a baggage and feeds into the racial hierarchies involved in the process of theory building and politics of knowledge production.

While for Pratt the contact zone is a space of cultures clashing, in this paper, we bring attention to the uneven dependencies and clashes of epistemological and ontological standpoints between ta'ārof and the white gaze performed in the academic contact zone. The chosen autoethnographies and their conceptualisations are not unique in discussing ta'ārof, but they highlight coloniality of power that also sustains itself within micro-interactions in academic relationships (Ahmed 2021; Aparna and Kramsch 2018; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Mählck 2013; Rahbari and Burlyuk 2023; Said 1999). This is done in the hope of invoking the readers to situate their own experiences within shifting power positions in the racial complex of academia and beyond.

At the same time, ta'ārofing, as a practice of self-breaking, holds the potential to unsettle whiteness as the performance of the Enlightened expert, which is based on extraction and reliant on the hospitality of those otherwise not welcome in academia. Ta'ārofing, as a practice of respect, holds the potential for reciprocity and for unsettling absences in curricula of racial states (Goldberg 2002). And finally, writing and publishing are also spaces of ta'ārofing, which we practised with each other, as well as the reviewers. In doing so, we believe, we were able to rewrite our lived experiences to reflect and conceptualise racial hierarchies and their embodiments of Knowing operating in more private and mundane interactions. This was also reciprocated by the reviewers in their comments. We now invite the readers to reflect on their own modes of participation in feeding or unsettling racial hierarchies and the dominant embodiments of Knowing performed and/or unsettled in daily conversations and interactions.

Acknowledgements

The Academy of Finland funded Centre of Excellence in Law, Identity and the European Narratives (funding decision numbers 336678 and 353311) supported parts of Kolar Aparna's work. We thank the editor and the reviewers for receiving our text in reciprocity, without giving up the rigour of critical thought and without demanding that we fit within a dominant way of Knowing, writing, and performing "expertise". We also wish to emphasise that co-authorship in this article comes from a relationality that cannot be measured in percentages. It is a labour of love that goes unseen by the competitive systems in academia we are currently navigating.

References

Afghari, Akbar and Amin Karimnia. 2012. "A contrastive study of four cultural differences in everyday conversation between English and Persian", *Intercultural Communication Studies* 16 (1): 243–250.

Ahmed, Sara. 2021. Complaint! New York: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. The Cultural Politics of Emotion. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2007. "A phenomenology of Whiteness", Feminist theory 8(2), 149–168.

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality. London: Routledge.

Aparna, Kolar, Zeinab Mahamed, Ingmar Deenen and Olivier Kramsch. 2017. "Lost Europe(s)", Etnografia e ricerca qualitative 10(3): 435–452.

Aparna, Kolar, and Olivier Kramsch. 2018. Asylum university: Re-situating knowledge-exchange along cross-border positionalities. In Decolonising the University, edited by Gurminder K Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 93–107. London: Pluto Press.

Beeman, William O. 1986. *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bhambra, Gurminder K, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu. 2018. Introduction: Decolonising the university? In Decolonising the University, edited by Gurminder K Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 1–15. London: Pluto press.

Cooper, Jan. 2004. "Queering the contact zone", *Journal of Advanced Composition* 24(1): 23–45.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dehkhoda, Ali Akbar 1931. *لغت‌نامه*. Tehran: Tehran University Press.

Eslami, Zohreh R. 2005. "Invitations in Persian: Ostensible or genuine?", *Intercultural Pragmatics Journal* 2(4): 453–448. https://doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2005.2.4.453

Farahani, Fataneh. 2015. "Home and homelessness and everything in between: A route from one uncomfortable zone to another", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 22(2): 241–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815576148

Freire, Paulo. 2000 [1970]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2016. "On Difference Without Separability." In Incerteza Viva: 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, edited by Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças, 57–65. São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. F. 2014 "Toward a Black feminist poethics: The quest(ion) of Blackness toward the end of the world", *The Black Scholar* 44(2): 81–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413690

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2007. *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. NED-New edition. Vol. 27. University of Minnesota Press.

Ghorashi, Halleh. 2005. "When the boundaries are blurred: The significance of feminist methods in research", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(3): 363–375. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506805054275

Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Goldberg, David Theo. 2002. *The Racial State*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Gross, Lena, Sepandarmaz Mashreghi, and Emma Söderman. 2023. "Refusal – Opening Otherwise Forms of Research." *Fennia – International Journal of Geography* 201(2): 154–168. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.120482

Hamzah, Saba and Kolar Aparna 2024. "Moving margins: Writing in relation as liberatory practice." *Social Inclusion* 12, Article 8534. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8534

Harding, Sandra. 2010. "Standpoint Methodologies and Epistemologies: A Logic of Scientific Inquiry for People." *World Social Science Report* 173-175.

hooks, bell. 1989. "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness", *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36: 15–23.

hooks, bell. 1991. "Theory as liberatory practice", *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4(1): Article 2.

Izadi, Ahmad. 2015. "Persian honorifics and im/politeness as social practice", *Journal of Pragmatics* 85: 85–91.

Karimi, Zeinab. 2024. "I am not the info desk for Islam and Arabs: the racialization of Islam and boundaries of citizenship", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47(1), 45–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2210659

Karimi, Zeinab. forthcoming. *Selective secularisation: Racialisation of Islam and boundaries of citizenship*. Routledge.

Koutlaki, Sofia. 2002. "Offers and expressions of thanks as face-enhancing acts: Ta'arof in Persian", *Journal of Pragmatics* 34(12): 1733–1756. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166(01)00055-8

Koutlaki, Sofia. 2010. *Among the Iranians: A guide to Iran's culture and customs*. Boston: Intercultural Press.

Lomnitz, Claudio. 2001. *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico. An Anthropology of Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lugones, María. 2008. "Coloniality and Gender", *Tabula Rasa* 9: 73–102.

Maldonado-Torres, Nwlson. 2007. "On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept." *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3): 240–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. ""Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(2): 499-535. https://doi.org/10.1086/342914

Mählck, Paula. 2013. "Academic women with migrant background in the global knowledge economy: Bodies, hierarchies and resistance", *Women's Studies International Forum* 36: 65–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2012.09.007

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.

Puwar, Nirmal. 2002. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*. New York: Berg Publisher.

Rahbari, Ladan. and Olga Burlyuk. 2023. "Introduction: Narrating migrant academics' precarity and resilience in Europe", In *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*, ix–xxx. Burlyuk O and Rahbari L (eds). Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Rosello, Mireille. 2002. *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Saberi, Kourosh. 2012. *Routine Politeness Formulae in Persian: A Socio-Lexical Analysis of Greetings, Leave-taking, Apologizing, Thanking and Requesting*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Canterbury.

Said, Edward. W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. W. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, Edward. W.1999. *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London: Granta Books.

Sharifian, Farzad. 2005. "The Persian cultural schema of shekastehnafsi: A study of Compliment Responses in Persian and Anglo-Australian speaker", *Pragmatics & Cognition 13* (2): 337–361. https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.13.2.05sha

Sharifian, Farzad. 2011 *Cultural Conceptualisations and Language: Theoretical*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Suhonić, Dino. (forthcoming). We Are Not Your Data: On Queer Muslim Resistance, Refusal and Rupture.In *Differential doings, europes in margins*, edited by Kolar Aparna and Jody Metcalfe. Helsinki University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson, & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Taleghani-Nikazm, Carmen. 1998. "Politeness in Persian interaction: The preference format of offers in Persian", *Cross-roads of Language, Interaction, and Culture* 1: 3–11.

Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument." *The New Centennial Review*, 3: 257–337.

Yaqubi, Mojde. 2012. "A cross-cultural study of politeness strategies applied in translations of English Requests as Face-threatening Acts into Persian", *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods* 2(2): 31–44.

Yaqubi, Mojde. 2018. "On subtitling of Ta'ārof apologies", *Journal of Language and Translation* 8(1): 31–42.

Yaqubi, Mojde. 2021. "Revisited interpretation of Ta'ārof towards a model of analysing meta-implicatures of Persian offers in Iranian films", *Spanish Journal of Applied Linguistics* 34(2): 712–738. https://doi.org/10.1075/resla.19017.yaq

Yaqubi, Mojde., EbrahimDavoudi Sharifabad and Wan Rose Eliza Abdul Rahman. 2013. "Gender-linked choice of politeness strategies applied to translation of Persian face-threatening acts into English", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* 1(7): 66–80.