EUrope in focus: imperial formations in the fabric of the European Union

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ABSTRACT
In the middle of the twentieth century, when the European Union (EU) started to take shape, numerous European colonies – many with a significant Muslim population – gained independence. These two moments in history need to be read in relation to each other when thinking about “Islam in Europe”. This paper engages in such a relational reading and shifts the analytical focus from “Islam” to “Europe”, exploring the ways “EUrope” manifests itself in the city of Brussels. By combining a spatialized analysis of the European Quarter with the conceptual lens of the “palimpsest”, I seek to offer a spatiotemporal framing that renders visible the material remains of imperial formations within the fabric of “EUrope”. The paper further explores how these often unmarked layers configure EU-space as “white” and Christian, and impact the ways Muslim bodies navigate within the EU-fabric and create counterspaces.

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A shift in perspective, or: what are we looking at?

Colonial pasts, the narratives recounted about them, the unspoken distinctions they continue to “cue,” the affective charges they reactivate, and the implicit “lessons” they are mobilized to impart are sometimes so ineffably threaded through the fabric of contemporary life forms they seem indiscernible as distinct effects, as if everywhere and nowhere at all. (Stoler 2016, 5)

In the past twenty years, the field of inquiry on “Islam in Europe” has been constantly growing. Much of the research conducted in this context consists of comparative case studies of Muslim communities in various national settings, grouped together under the banner of “Islam in Europe” or “European Islam” (Cesari 2015). The following investigation positions itself within this...
field but contributes to it in a different manner. Firstly, it seeks to transcend “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2014), taking the European Union (EU) as a locus for expressions of European Muslimness seriously and thus going beyond “the nation” as the unit of analysis. Secondly, and more importantly, it shifts the analytical focus from “Islam” to “Europe”. This move derives from an unease with the term “Europe” or “European”, and the lack of scholarly scrutiny it has received in much of the research on “Islam in Europe”. This paper advocates for bringing into focus the cypher of “Europeanness”, for which we need to disentangle multiple layers of the fabric of Europe. The following investigation offers such a layered reading, shifting the gaze from one element (Islam) of a closely knitted fabric to the broader configuration of “Europe”. How is “Europe” being made? And who is involved in this process of making? What is the materiality of “Europeanness”? What affects and emotions does it cultivate? How is “Europeanness” being performed? And what is the relationship between the “new” post-World War II Europe, and “old” Europe? These are just some of the questions rarely asked in research on “Islam in Europe”, which tends to look more at “Islam” than at “Europe”. However, if “Europe” remains an unquestioned variable in the equation of “Islam in Europe”, we risk being trapped in myopic contemplations. In this shift of perspective, I draw on Gil Anidjar, who sets “the task of understanding Europe as a question and a problem”, rather than exclusively focusing on “the Muslim Question” (Anidjar 2013, 39). In fact, Anidjar suggest that the “European Question” and the “Muslim Question” are closely connected, arguing that the construction of enemies, both internal (the figure of “the Jew”) and external (the figure of “the Muslim”), functions as a means to overcome Europe’s perceived problem of a lack of unity. Building on Milner’s Les penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique Anidjar proposes that Europe has all along sought its own integrity, its unity or identity, but that it has done so through different, at times exclusive, at times inclusive, technologies, the institutionalization of others as “problems.” […] Europe has also persisted in distinguishing between these different problems, producing hierarchies, and geographies, of alterity among and between distinct groups and collectives or populations. (Anidjar 2013, 40)

One way of scrutinizing the “European Question” therefore seems to lead towards loci dedicated to the production of European unity. Exploring these spaces and the hierarchies, exclusions and “geographies of alterity” they generate shall guide the following investigation.

In its quest to “understand Europe”, this paper looks at one very particular formation of Europe, namely the “EUrobe” of the European Union (EU). While the EU is of course not a synonym for, or identical to, “Europe”, it nevertheless presents an important set of actors in the field of Europeanization – of making and unmaking “Europe”. It shapes the legal, economic, symbolic, and political realms, and impacts everyday practices of millions of people. In the past sixty
years, an increasing corpus of literature has been evolving on this emerging formation of EUrope and has led to the establishment of new disciplinary orientations such as “European Studies”. Here I am particularly inspired by research that analyses the processes of “making EUrope” through cultivating specific forms of knowledge, memory building and habitus (Buettner 2018; Kuus 2014; Shore 2000; Welz 2015). My approach here seeks to bring these two strands of research on “EUrope” and “Islam in Europe” into conversation. The underlying incentive guiding this specific framing is my proposition to view “Islam” as a prism through which to look at the formation of “EUrope”. This analytical window offers insightful perspectives and guides us along pathways of buried genealogies within the fabric of EUrope. As I have argued elsewhere (Taleb 2017), contemporary debates regarding the figure of “the Muslim” need to be read in relation to Europe’s colonial histories, not least because the biographies of many Muslims across Europe are tied to regions that were colonized by European states.2

The interconnection between categories of “race” and “religion” and processes of “racialization” of Muslims have been analysed in various studies (Topolski 2020; Jansen 2020; Goldberg 2006). Furthermore, a well-established corpus of literature has illustrated the ways in which Islam is being constructed as a prominent “Other” of Europe, and thus holds an important function in discourses aimed at collective European identity construction (Bunzl 2005). Building on these insights, this paper sets out on an exploration of the fabric of “EUrope”, by looking at it through the lens of Islam and Muslim biographies. In this way, we are cultivating a gaze that is acutely aware of strands within the EU-fabric that are related to formations of “race” and “religion”, pointing us towards imperial traces closely tied to Europe’s colonial history. The claim here is that this past is not past, but still participates in the present.

In the following reflections, the focus will be on the way these colonial histories are present throughout the fundament the EU is built upon, and in particular how they find their spatial expression in the city of Brussels. Since the EU is a multi-layered, complex and heterogenous project with diverse actors, the aim of the following explorations is by no means to draw a comprehensive picture of “the” EU, but merely to consider certain aspects of this complex fabric. I chose the term “fabric” very consciously and positioned it prominently in the paper’s title, since it facilitates a multi-perspectival approach when looking at the EU. The term “fabric” can refer to textiles and garments and it may conjure up images of weaving threads together. But it also points us towards architecture and the elementary structures of buildings such as the roof, external windows, walls, and the floor, which together form the fabric of a building. Further, it has a geological use, describing “the texture, arrangement, and orientation of the constituents of a rock” (Collins dictionary). In this context, “fabrics” tell us about the different depositions and layers in sedimentary rocks. Finally, “fabric” can describe the composition of socio-political
formations, such as when we speak of the fabric of a society. In relation to the EU’s fabric, the paper will reflect on some of the meanings of this term. First, we explore the spatiotemporal dimensions that are made apparent by linking notions of “fabric” to the concept of “palimpsest”. Second, we investigate some of the sedimented layers of the European Quarter in Brussels, drawing here on the geological meaning of fabric. Third, we reflect on the weaving patterns of the EU-fabric and the possibilities for subversion. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of imagining different futures.

Spatializing the analysis: notes on the palimpsestic texture of the EU-fabric

The following analysis draws out some of the insights that we may gain from a spatial analysis of Europe. To investigate spatial elements involved in the “making” of the EU, and how they unfold in the city of Brussels, I follow understandings of space that conceptualize it as constantly emerging (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996). In other words, space is being produced by the imagined or real interaction of human and non-human entities and their relation to each other. These relations are marked by power. However, as Lefebvre notes, space is not a “passive locus of social relations, the milieu in which their combination takes on body”. Instead, one should look at “the active – the operational or instrumental – role of space, as knowledge and action” (Lefebvre 1991, 11). Some recent ethnographic studies inspired by the Lefebvrean notion of space offer insightful descriptions of “EU-space” (Lewicki 2017) in the city of Brussels. During my fieldwork, for which I engaged with Eurocrats and NGOs active in the field of “minority rights”, I became part of this particular texture of the “EU-Bubble” (Busby 2013) – a distinct social space that manifests itself in the city of Brussels and is encoded with multiple signs and a particular habitus. I turn here to Lewicki, who has captured this “EU-space” in a compelling fashion:

an imaginative social and cultural space comprised of EU civil servants and people working in institutions, lobbies, representations of member states […] and its regions. EU-space however has a tangible aspect: it is constantly reproduced by the people within it and becomes visible both in material space and in interactions and relations within this space and between the spatial, material and symbolic, imaginative aspects of European space in the capital of EU Europe. (Lewicki 2017, 25)

EU-space is a peculiar kind of space. It is produced by certain bodies, their relationship to one another and their specific modes of interaction. As well as analysing these human interactions, we also need to recognize that EU-space is produced in significant ways by non-human actors. Monuments, street names and architectural forms, as well as EU-directives and policies drafted in EU-offices throughout Brussels, equally shape EU-space. How do
these elements of glass, steel, stone, ink, and paper impact the texture of the fabric of the EU? To what extent can they be interpreted as archives for a genealogy of the EU? And how do these archives live and form the present? These are some of the questions that will guide the following sections of the paper. It will look at the “perceived space” (Lefebvre 1991) in its concrete material form as it manifests in the European Quarter in Brussels. When unravelling this quality of EU-space (perceived space) it seems particularly promising to “dig deep” – in a literal as well as metaphorical sense – within the very foundations the EU is built upon. Again, a relational approach to space that is closely linked to knowledge and power is very helpful in such an analysis, encouraging us to ask: what narratives of Europe’s past, present and future are “given space”? What kinds of knowledge are being produced by this EU-space and what forms of power do they generate? Here power shall be understood in the Foucauldian sense as productive, rather than merely repressive (Foucault 1980). Thus, we might ask: what kinds of subject formations are being made possible by this EU-space? Who can speak, and from which positions?

EU-space is a space that is clearly structured by class (Busby 2013; Lewicki 2017, 68) and constitutes a specific social milieu with its own rules and habitus (Kuus 2014). While existing studies of EU-space are insightful in their analysis of mechanisms of creating insiders and outsiders to this “Planet Brussels” (Kuus 2014), they are limited in scope. The interlinked categories of “race” and “religion”, as well as “gender”, are under-explored in most analyses of EU-space, whereas I would argue that they are crucial factors in configuring the EU-fabric. Through processes of interpellation bodies are classified according to class, “religion”, “race” or “gender”, and positioned in specific realms of this stratified space, allowing some bodies to move freely, seeming more at ease with the texture of the fabric, than others. It is remarkable that within EU-space in Brussels one finds a disproportionately higher number of “brown bodies” among those doing security checks, cleaning facilities, and providing catering, than among those seated in the plenary sessions of the European Parliament or the offices of the European Commission. A recent survey found that only 5 per cent i.e. 36 of the 751 MEPs have an ethnic minority background, a number that dropped to 30 after Brexit (Chander 2019). This study, while having some limitations, is indicative of what is obvious to the observer walking within the “EU-bubble” – “Planet Brussels” is a “white³ space”. I suggest reading the pattern of this stratification in relation to the durabilities (Stoler 2016) inscribed in the very “geology” of the EU-fabric. Here, I would like to explore the question of what is being echoed and conserved in the sedimented layers of the fabric of the EU. In this exploration I am not only inspired by Ann Stoler’s reflections on “imperial formations” (2006, 2008), but also by the idea of “palimpsest” as used by Pasture (2018), Puwar (2010), Schuller (2018) and Dillon (2007). Palimpsest, a term signifying
the kind of materiality that emerges when scripture is washed or scratched off from surfaces so the material may be reused and engraved anew, is a helpful tool to grasp the specific texture of the EU-fabric, and the way it manifests in the city of Brussels. Indeed, one could make the broader claim that “Europe’s colonial history is like a palimpsest in which the ‘after-image’ of empire nevertheless shines through, which can effectively be seen in some EU practices up to today” (Pasture 2018, 2). Adding to Pasture’s reflection on “the art of forgetting and the palimpsest of empire” (2018), I would stress that the “‘after-image’ of empire” is not only seen in EU practices, but also in its materiality. I would also like to clarify that the way I use palimpsest in the following analysis is more related to the overall textuality of the fabric of the EU. With this I mean that the way the EU-textile is woven, the EU-house is built, or the EU-geological formation is sedimented is reminiscent of a palimpsest. Above all, the analytical work of this palimpsestic approach to EU-space points us towards a genealogical reading of European history. It is not an understanding of history that is organized in a linear way, but rather in a layered, multidirectional manner. As Schuller stresses: “Its temporal nature renders a palimpsest inherently unstable. Layers do not accrue in a linear fashion. Rather, the most recent record of contact coheres with even the oldest” (Schuller 2018, 97). Thus, the work I engage in here is that of scratching off certain layers of that palimpsestic fabric and tracing hidden inscriptions or connecting letters in plain side to new words.

**Sedimentation in EU-space: the European Quarter and imperial formations**

One locus where EU-space can be studied is the European Quarter (Figure 1), a district of Brussels reaching from the Rue de la Loi to the Rue Belliard, and host to most EU buildings. This part of Brussels, formerly a residential area of the Belgian upper-middle class, began to change when its inhabitants moved to greener areas at the city’s outskirts. Gradually, the district was abandoned, and its socio-cultural makeup changed in the 1960s and 1970s, attracting increasing numbers of migrant families of Turkish and North African descent. As identified by Guy Baeten (2001), the considerable shift in socio-economic composition in this part of Brussels was not a welcome development in the eyes of the local administration, in part due to lower tax returns. Brussels’ administrative elite was therefore happy to see this area re-populated with white middle-upper classes due to the EU’s emergence and expansion in this district in the past fifty years, and their continuing need for additional office space. A neo-liberal striving for the most efficient use of available space influences the specific architectural form of many buildings in this part of Brussels (Sterken 2015), which often reach up high in the sky and dig down deep in the soil with several underground levels. One particularly interesting example
of this architectural development is the Berlaymont building, host to the head- quarters of the European Commission (EC) and described as a “lieu de mémoire européenne” (place of European memory) by former EC president Romano Prodi. During the inauguration of the Berlaymont in 2004, following more than twenty years of extensive renovation, Prodi goes as far as calling it the flagship, the very symbol of the Europe we were building, a Europe that was asserting itself in its policies, expanding geographically, strengthening its institutions. In the mind of the European citizen, a simple equation had been established over the years: Berlaymont = Brussels = Europe. (Prodi 2004, translation Adela Taleb)
Keeping Anidjar in mind, we can thus read the Berlaymont as a site for performing European unity. In the eyes of EU officials, the Berlaymont clearly contributes towards the creation of a common European narrative.

The Berlaymont’s iconic shape inspires the official emblem of the EC and its history is telling when thinking about the texture of the EU-fabric. This building owes its name to the convent des Dames de Berlaymont, a Catholic order founded in 1625, whose premises were situated in this space before its demolition and the subsequent construction of the EC headquarters in the convent’s former park areas in 1963. Due to financial difficulties, the order of nuns agreed to a deal offered by the Belgian government, which was desperate to find a large enough location to construct new office space for the EU. Interestingly, the shape of the Berlaymont building, when seen from above, bears clear resemblance with a cross. While a full exploration of the aesthetic language of Lucien de Vestel, Berlaymont’s architect, is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems relevant for our object of study to at least mention his involvement in another symbolically charged project. In 1931 de Vestel co-designed the “Belgian pavilion”, which aimed at mimicking a “Congolese village” for the colonial exhibition in Paris. Together with his colleague Henri Lacoste he created the pavilion in a style that some see as “a brilliant exercise in what Jean-Claude Vigato once described as ‘colonizing the vocabulary of exotic architecture through the architectural principles of the École des Beaux-Arts’” (Lagae 2004, 544). Thus, elements of the architectural language de Vestel cultivates seem to be entangled with an aesthetic repertoire nourished by colonialism and Christianity.

Christianity is one prominent component the foundation of Europe’s “conceived space” (Lefebvre 1991) of shared values, norms, and histories is built upon – and in the case of the EC headquarter of the Berlaymont, in quite a literal sense. However, the extent to which ideas of a “European Christian heritage” are linked to systems of racialization is hardly addressed in established discourses. The heated discussion on a reference to Europe’s Christian roots in the intended preamble for the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) – which ultimately was not ratified because of the 2005 referendums in France and the Netherlands – is but one example for the way Christianity is framed as a common European denominator. In her analysis of the preamble debates Anya Topolski focuses on the signifier “Judeo-Christian heritage” which she identifies as being for some “synonymous with Christianity and, for others, with secularism” (Topolski 2020, 14). According to her close reading, the “meaning of the signifier Judaeo-Christianity has shifted from originally excluding Jews and Catholics to now symbolically including them in order to fortify its exclusion of Muslims”. Topolski argues however, that this inclusion of Jewish people, presents “empty symbolism” (2020, 16) in a debate marked by a “concealed race-religion constellation” (Topolski 2020, 14). The way narratives of collective identity formation, along the fault line
of religious classification are linked to the racialization of “religion” is a well-studied technology of Europe’s imperial endeavours. The expulsion of Jews and Muslims from “Christian Europe” in 1492 – thus linking Christianity to “whiteness” (Fadil 2020) – is an early example of this and needs to be read in the context of the fifteenth century “exploration” of “the New World”. Marking non-Christian bodies as non-European, and non-white, is not just a long-past episode in Europe’s history. It was also operationalized for twentieth century colonial rule (Davis 2021; Taleb 2017) at a time when Europe was forming and is echoed in the current rise of right-wing movements across Europe’s member states. One example here is the German PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) that developed a pan-European network reaching from Austria to Bulgaria and the Netherlands. Following this vein of reflection, I suggest that reading the fabric of Europe with “the Muslim Question” in mind necessitates not only deciphering the Christian-secular matrix that structures its foundations, but also tracing colonial residues that shape the related race-religion constellation in Europe. The following passages will illustrate that spaces in which the EU built its offices, locations in which its staff circulates bear witness not only to the EU’s Christian legacy but also – and this is seldom part of the “official” EU narrative – to the duress of its imperial formations (Stoler 2016).

The fact that the EU has materially manifested itself, claiming physical space and attracting a certain kind of cosmopolitan elite, in a locus officially called Leopold Quarter (Figure 2), merits further examination. Leopold Quarter is often used synonymously with the unofficial name European Quarter, to mark a district in Brussels named after the first King of Belgium, Leopold I. It stands as a symbolic emblem of the economic success of industrial Belgium, as monuments and remaining historic buildings indicate to this day. But Leopold Quarter is also a space related to Belgium’s colonial endeavour in Africa led by Leopold’s son, Leopold II. While his father Leopold I expressed colonial ambitions, their realization remained mostly unsuccessful (Ansiaux 2006) and only found cruel fruition in the next generation. The exploitation of the Congo by the Kingdom of Belgium under Leopold II stands among the most brutal colonial undertakings of nineteenth century Europe. Trade in products now associated as typically Belgian, such as chocolate or diamond jewellery from the Antwerp region, flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and relied upon the extraction of resources from Congolese soil, helping Belgium to accumulate considerable wealth. Up to this day, one can find clear signs of Belgium’s colonial connections in the “capital of Europe”, as Brussels is now frequently called. “Leopold” remains an important reference in the European Quarter, eponym for landmarks such as the Espace Léopold, a set of buildings hosting the European Parliament, or Leopold Park, which is home to the newly opened House of European History (HEH) – a museum dedicated to the history of Europe. The European Parliament (EP), a significant institution
within the EU-fabric, is strongly involved in the production of EUropean “social space” (Lefebvre 1991) as demonstrated by its 2017 initiative to establish the HEH. The very location of the HEH in Leopold Park named after Leopold II, would have offered a good opportunity to reflect on the imperial formations within the fabric of EUrope. As with many other public green spaces in Brussels, Leopold Park was created as part of Leopold II’s larger city-planning strategy, which aimed to give the young kingdom a modern European city, in the mould of Paris or London. Large boulevards and public green spaces were connected by wide avenues hosting stores that displayed the splendours of industrial Belgium, closely linked to its colonial endeavours.
A plaque at the entrance of Leopold Park hints today at the nineteenth century history of this green area within the European Quarter (Figure 3). The space of Leopold Park, as well as some of its historic buildings that were formally part of the Brussels zoo (Figure 4), were created in 1851. However, there is no mention that next to “exotic plants and animals”, the zoo area exhibited indigenous people from South America brought to Brussels in 1876 for anthropological measurements (Couttenier 2014, 106–107). These dehumanizing practices of anthropological “research” are closely linked to the popular and widespread practice of featuring “human zoos” at “World’s Fairs” across European cities in the nineteenth and twentieth century, prominent examples being the colonial exhibitions of 1896 in Berlin and 1931 in Paris, or the “World’s Fair” of 1897 in Brussels. These practices of “studying” and “exhibiting” “exotic Others” and producing racial hierarchies need to be read as part of Europe’s imperial formations, formations whose traces are stored in the sedimented layers of Leopold Park but are not featured in official narratives of this public space. In search of these less glorious European memories, I enter the HEH. To my knowledge there is no reference in the museum space itself to the brutal history of the very place this house for Europe is built upon. Even if the HEH missed the opportunity to reflect on the geology its foundation is built upon, at least it does not leave colonialism unmentioned in its exhibition. As Buettner has noted:

Indeed, Europe’s entangled history with the rest of the world was given critical and insightful attention in ways that many observers had not anticipated during the extended planning period. The HEH explicitly addresses the racist, exploitative, violent and militaristic aspect of European imperialism, particularly as they concern the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Buettner 2018, 139)

However, I would argue that a closer investigation of the display dedicated to Europe’s colonial history raises many questions as to whether the effect it leaves is ethical. Reconstructions of wax heads intended to represent different ethnicities are displayed next to measuring instruments to illustrate the “research” conducted during that time. The violence and brutality at play in these nineteenth century practices is reproduced, one could argue, by the manner these naturalistic wax heads are arranged in glass vitrines, displaying body parts as if they had been chopped off from the rest of the body. These visual impressions can be unsettling and possibly even traumatic, especially to non-white museum visitors whose families experienced atrocities of colonial rule. Next to other artefacts from that period, the showcase also holds a document with the signatures of European statesmen. It was drafted at the Berlin Conference (1884–85), when Leopold II was “given” Congo as his private property. The Berlin Congo Conference, as it is sometimes called, marked the moment Africa was divided up among European states. The sharply drawn, artificial borders of many African countries bear testimony
to this event to this day. It is crucial that the HEH included an artefact referring to this important European event. The Berlin Conference clearly illustrates the European dimension of Belgian colonialism, thus disqualifying claims that imperial formations in the fabric of the city of Brussels merely indicate Belgian colonial engagement. While the HEH did address European colonialism, it did not continue on this path and trace the colonial legacies up to the present, and in fact “the museum leaves European colonialism behind at precisely the moment when the British and French empires reached their greatest territorial extent after assuming control of former German and Ottoman territories as mandates after the First World War” (Buettner 2018, 140).
Buettner also points out the HEH’s failure to adequately address Turkey’s complex and multilayered entanglement with “Europe”, as well as the various ways in which biographies of people from former European colonial territories are connected to Europe’s present and future. To use her words: “the visitor is presented with a Europe that to all intents and purposes is completely white and secular” (Buettner 2018, 146).

In close proximity to Leopold Park one finds Espace Léopold, the architectural complex hosting the European Parliament in Brussels and busy workspace of numerous Eurocrats. Espace Léopold borders an area frequently referred to as Matongé, named after a district in the city of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Matongé in Brussels is a vibrant multi-cultural
space filled with shops, restaurants, and cultural centres, and has recently been subject to heavy gentrification (Demart 2013). In many ways Matongé seems diametrically opposed – but historically linked – to its bordering district of the European Quarter. “Old” imperial Europe, and “new” Europe material interlink and overlap in this specific space in Brussels. While material remains hinting at the colonial investment of individuals and states can be found in the fabric of most European cities, it seems particularly striking in this case and points to the rarely told histories of the project of building the EU and its entanglements with imperial formations. By shifting the gaze to these marginalized histories, the project of building the EU appears not only motivated by overcoming conflict and ensuring peace – the often summoned “foundational tale of pure origins, of an Immaculate Conception, which sets in place the main elements of a wishful and idealized European identity” (Hansen and Jonsson 2014, 5). Rather, as described by Hansen, this “new Europe” seems to function as a “space in which ruling elites were provided an opportunity to trade the grievances over the loss of empire”, and to counterbalance power shifts in the post-World War II era (Hansen 2002, 494). Following the colonial traces and digging within the layers of history shows that, since its very beginnings, this “new Europe” was entangled with war. The 1957 Treaty of Rome, marking the formal beginning of the European Economic Community, was signed at the very moment when France was fighting a most brutal war in Algeria, which ultimately, after more than 130 years of colonial presence, led to Algerian independence in 1962. This historic state of affairs also means that during these early stages of European integration, North African regions were part of the European project, just as some territories, such as Martinique, Mayotte and Réunion, far beyond the European continent, continue to be to this day. These alternative accounts of the history of European integration not only challenge the foundational myth of peace and anti-violence, but also the imagined geographies of the EU-space.

Interestingly, keeping the metaphor of palimpsest in mind, if we approach the EU-space as a sedimented space, we can see it as an archive of these former colonial ambitions and are urged to question to what extent deeper layers of this sedimented fabric still affect the current make-up of this space. Here I advocate for a non-linear spatiotemporal view on EU-space, which not only allows approaching space as multidimensional, but also time as polyvocal. As Schuller aptly expresses:

A palimpsest is a heterogeneous archive in which discrete impressions from years past integrate with sensations of the moment. Temporality registers in the material form of textuality, yet it maintains an ethereal quality in which the past is at once legible to the senses of touch and sight, and yet not fully tangible. The present becomes a semiopaque vantage onto its own antecedents, which remain in tantalizingly close proximity. Piling up experience on experience, the
palimpsest becomes a site of contestation, forged of disparate and competing cultural events that nonetheless cohere as one. (Schuller 2018, 97)

Schuller shares these reflections on the specific temporal qualities of a palimpsest in her intriguing work on the “biopolitics of feeling” (Schuller 2018), in which she reflects on the formation of the category of “race” in the nineteenth century. I draw inspiration from her thoughts for the EU context, by reading the semiopaqueness of the present in relation to claims of transparency prominent within the EU-fabric. While rationalities of transparency clearly feature within EU-space, the texture (in its material and discursive form) of the EU-fabric equally entails aspects that are obscured. Rather than assuming that transparency within the EU-space entails clarity of vision, I suggest approaching the texture of the EU-fabric as oscillating between opacity and transparency, generating a state of semi-opaqueness. The fundamental question is, which of its layers are seen by whom, and what is brought to full sight, and under which circumstances?

Golden threads: oninterrupting the weaving pattern

The fabric of EU-space is constantly changing its shape, as buildings are demolished, and new ones built. Member states leave the Union, as in the case of the UK, while others may join in the future. And while there is continuous fluctuation, this fabric also seems to produce certain durabilities, with some of its more sedimented layers bearing witness to colonial entanglements and deeply ingrained structures of classification along the lines of “race” and “religion” that also shape imaginaries of EUropeanness. The figure of “the Muslim” as a prominent European “Other” occupies an important place within “geographies of alterity” (Anidjar 2013) that strive towards creating European unity and generate narratives of “European heritage”. Today’s expressions of anti-Muslim hatred, governance and surveillance of Muslim bodies and the pressure exercised on them to assimilate into the “pure (secularized Christian) body” of EUrope (Fadil 2020) need to be read as closely linked to practices of “racialization” of Muslims during colonial rule (Davis 2021; Taleb 2017). Addressing the “Muslim problem” as constitutive of the “European Question” (Anidjar 2013) therefore also entails deciphering the “colonial script” legible between the lines of Europe’s narratives of unity today. A spatial analysis of the EU-fabric reveals these colonial durabilities in their material form, echoed throughout the European Quarter. However, the palimpsestic texture of the EU-fabric keeps these imperial formations hidden in plain sight. In order to truly live up to its proclaimed values of non-discrimination and “racial equality” most recently expressed in the State of the Union address by EC commissioner (Von der Leyen 2020), the EU needs to dig deep into its foundations rooted in colonial materialities and epistemologies of “race” and “religion”, and dismantle them.
The prism of Islam and the biographies of Muslims across Europe offer a helpful analytical vantage point where these durabilities of imperial formations come to the fore, as the next section will illuminate.

Let us turn to the example of Magid Magid, a 31-year-old member of the Green Party of England and Wales, who was elected to the EP in 2019. Even before Magid entered the Brussels scene, he was a figure of major public interest and debate. As elected Lord Mayor of Sheffield, Magid already made a point of “doing things differently” by posting an inauguration picture that drew much attention: “amid the shadowy, gilded confines of Sheffield’s Victorian Town Hall, he squats – complete with ceremonial chain, Dr Martens boots and wide-eyed smile – high on a balustrade”, as Colin Drury from the *The Independent* describes with amazement (2018). Magid’s hyper-visibility within the EU-space was not only due to his non-conformity with the habitus of EUrocrats (Kuus 2014) – he never wore a suit but instead colourful baseball caps and T-shirts with political messages – but was also, I would argue, related to his “ethnicity” and religious positionality. Magid, a self-identifying Muslim of Somali descent, is one of the few MEPs historically to have a non-white background. Until the end of his mandate – due to the UK’s departure from the EU – he was a strong advocate within EU-space on issues relating to “Islamophobia” and openly lived his religiosity. On various occasions Magid interrogated the supposedly secular script of EU conduct, which in practice often favours Christian forms of embodiment.

One such example of challenging the established EU-script is his initiation of the first *Jumu‘ah* prayer within the facilities of the EP. Since 1999, there has been a prayer and meditation room within the parliamentary space. Twenty years after this room was opened and hosted the first Christian service, it was used for a Friday prayer for the very first time, drawing Muslim MEPs, staff, and employees of the EP. Since there are many Muslims among the cleaning, security, and maintenance staff in the EP, the room was packed that day. In an interview, Magid shared his experience in organizing this gathering.

> At the start of the term you had three MEPs that booked the entire prayer room. Not for one week, not for two months: for five years! For the full mandate […]. How is the system even allowing certain MEPs – they were Christian, but of course it should be, everyone should be able to use it – but how has this even allowed them to book something for five years? And when I went to book and they said: oh sorry it is all fully booked. So I was: oh ok, so what about the week after? They said it’s booked for five years [laughs out loud]. It’s just completely nuts […] people understood they did not have a leg to stand on, but their argument was: oh but it has always been like this. Just because it has always been like this doesn’t make it right. (Interview by Adela Taleb)

This is just one example illustrating the kinds of unwritten rules that Magid found disturbing when entering the EU-bubble, and that highlight the secular-Christian, “white” patterns that organize the EU-space. He stated that:
within the European Parliament [...] people were like not so much kind of wanting to, I don’t know, kind of just like speak about their religion. In my team I had two Muslim girls that wore the headscarf, and they were the only visibly, in terms of visibly Muslim women, in the entire European Parliament building that we saw in the eight months that we were there anyway, right? And they would kind of say they’d always come across Muslim girls and they would say they used to wear the hijab, but when they came to the European Parliament they took it off because, they felt uncomfortable wearing it. And I was like: listen, we need to have the Friday prayers. (Interview by Adela Taleb)

The account here that Muslimness cannot visibly be performed or openly expressed easily when holding an official position within the EU structure is symptomatic of the EU-fabric and featured in various discussions I followed during my fieldwork. Magid further stated that some people who have been working together for nearly seven years only realized that their colleague was Muslim when the first Friday prayer was organized.

What I aim to illustrate by sharing my exchanges with Magid is that there are certain ways of performing Europeanness that make it more difficult for some members of society to access this sphere. Research focusing on analysing EU-habitus often fails to consider the secular, Christian norms for performing Europeanness. At this point, it is helpful to turn to Puwar’s study of the Palace of Westminster. As she points out in relation to the ways female MPs navigate this political, male space: “Somatic norms prevail in the scripts of members. The rites are spectacular, as well as bureaucratic. The discussion opens up one of many ways in which we can engage with the building as a multi-sensory site of inhabitation” (Puar 2010, 311). Just as Puwar applies a gender-sensitive analysis to her fieldsite of Westminster, I advocate for a race/religion-sensitive mode of researching EU-habitus. To do so, I question the “somatic norms” that dictate the conduct of bodies walking the halls of the Espace Léopold or the Berlaymont as a much-needed perspective in research on “making EUrope”.

Moments of unsettling and disrupting the established weaving pattern of the EU-fabric and questioning “somatic norms” hold the potential to open up a space for alternative futures. Such moments echo what Lefebvre calls “lived space” and Soja describes in his oeuvre Thirdspace as a “terrain for the generation of “counterspace”, spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positionings” (Soja 1996, 68). One further example for such a counterspace is the Brexit-goodbye party organized by Magid in January 2020. The event’s Facebook invitation reads,

Hard or soft, Brexit’s shit – but that doesn’t mean we can’t party together! Let’s meet for the historic last Plux with the UK in the EU and go out in style – don’t miss it. […] Meet us on the grass by the statue! (Magid 2020)
This event brought together people that were grieving the departure of the UK from the EU, and stood in contrast to celebrations happening elsewhere, organized by MEP Nigel Farage and his followers that saw Brexit as a glorious victory of independence from the “EU diktat”. I would like to focus on the visuality of the advertisement for the Brexit goodbye party organized by Magid and his staff. The Plux (Place du Luxemburg) is the central meeting spot for many Eurocrats after working hours. At the centre of this square is the statue of John Cockerill, a nineteenth century industrial figure active in the cotton and steel industry. Cockerill can be seen as emblematic of the aforementioned imperial formations that are interwoven with the fabric of the EU. For his party’s advertisement, Magid, a “Muslim refugee from Somalia” as he describes himself, photoshopped his crouching figure on the pedestal of the statue of John Cockerill (see Figure 5). Now, whether or not this was a conscious move to subvert the palimpsest of the EU-space – removing “old scripture” and replacing it with “new” – it surely does disrupt the visual regime of the established EU-script. In many ways Magid and his involvement within EU-space illustrates my approach to viewing EUrope through the prism of Islam and what this specific gaze allows us to see. His embodied Muslimness illustrates how the EU-script is navigated more easily by secular or Christian bodies. One might furthermore ask how gender features in this situation and consider the implications of electing a headscarf-wearing female Muslim MEP.

Other than his religious identity, Magid’s biography more broadly echoes many of the deeper layers of colonialism ingrained within the imperial formations of the EU-fabric. With his mother and siblings, he fled from civil war in Somalia to the UK at a young age. Important to recall in this context is the fact that the territory of present-day Somalia was divided into two parts during nineteenth century colonial rule. While the northern part was included in the British Empire, the southern part was under Italian colonial rule: a true European “joined-mission”. During World War II, in an extension of Europe’s fight against Nazism, Britain fought fascist Italy in Somalia: one of the many examples illustrating that European states involvement in World War II was not restricted to the geographic space of present-day Europe. When Italy signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and became one of the founding members of the EUropean project, parts of Somalia were still under Italian administration. Both Somali regions previously under European (British and Italian) colonial rule gained independence in 1960 and the territories were reunited. Some authors have argued that the “imposition of colonial state structures upon a previously acephalous society” which led to a “European-style centralised state”, fuelled the escalation of civil war in the 1980s – a civil war that led to Magid and his family becoming refugees in EUrope. (Hoehne 2010, 344). This short sketch considering Somalia’s entanglements with EUrope, while a partial account of a complex series of
events, indicates what looking at EUrope through the biographies of Muslims and the prism of Islam might shed light on.

EUrope needs to make visible its golden threads, not as ornaments strategically used to showcase its “diversity”, but as reminders of the continent’s colonial past that constitutes the soil EUrope is rooted in and thus keeps nourishing the spaces – discursive and material – that emerge in the present. Retelling Europe’s history through the words, images and family histories of Muslims living in Europe today has the immense potential to shed light on some of the forgotten or buried facts in the lower layers of the palimpsestic fabric of EUrope and contributes to the establishing of a postcolonial Europe. As Bhambra aptly states: “Looking at Europe differently, as Dainotto argues, means not only changing perspectives and points of view, but also requires interrogating the very cultural categories on which ideas of Europe have been predicated” (Bhambra 2009, 81). Some of these foundational “cultural categories” of Europe, worthy further interrogation, might be “race”, “religion” and “secularism”.

An outlook: what futures lie ahead?

The different sites within the European Quarter of Brussels such as the Berlaymont, the Leopold Park, the Place du Luxembourg, and the bordering area of Matongé, all point in their own ways to the complex entanglement of the EU-fabric with imperial formations. Echoes of colonialism and a
Christian “infrastructure” are still very present within this supposedly secular bubble of “EU-space”. By looking at the fabric of EUrope via the prism of “Islam” and the biographies of Muslims some of the obscured, sedimented layers of empire become more intelligible. The focus here on EUrope conjures questions related to “race” and “religion” and, more generally, systems of classification that are deeply embedded within the fabric of EUrope. The ways Muslim bodies are being marked as “Other”, surveilled, racialized and pressured to assimilate into a white secularized Christian matrix today need to be read in relation to these longer standing genealogies of building Europe. I agree with Stoler’s assessment of the ultimate purpose of bringing to the fore imperial formations and their durabilities in the present. As she aptly states:

the project is not to fashion a genealogy of catastrophe or redemption. Making connections where they are hard to trace is not designed to settle scores but rather to recognize that these are unfinished histories, not of victimized pasts but consequential histories that open to differential futures. (Stoler 2008, 195)

This paper engages in the labour of digging within the fabric of EUrope to further nuance the debate on “Islam in Europe”, linking “the Muslim Question” to the “European Question” and viewing this configuration through the prism of “race” and its colonial genealogies that clearly carry a transnational, a European dimension. Consequently, the proposed approach goes beyond framing debates on “Islam in Europe” along national histories of recent “migration”. Put differently: present imaginaries of “Europeanness”, that are in many ways shaped by the project of building EUrope, are interwoven with a deeply rooted genealogy of European ambitions of territorial expansion and building narratives of Christian white unity that racialize certain bodies as “Other”. Theoretical tools that provide us with the equipment to do the work of excavation, and contribute towards these “differential futures” that Stoler mentions, necessitate further development. The “palimpsest” is just one suggested approach, allowing us to view history not as past but connected to the present and the future. As Dillon reminds us:

Palimpsests are of such interest to subsequent generations because although the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased. Its ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish-brown oxide. (Dillon 2007, 12)

In the early 2020s, statues are being toppled across Europe, streets are being renamed, and established practices of remembering in the public space are being challenged. After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum, spilling over to Europe
and putting the transatlantic slave trade into renewed focus. And with xenophobic killings on the rise, such as the one in the German town of Hanau in February 2020, official acknowledgment of the acuteness of anti-Muslim racism is increasingly demanded. It seems that a fresh wind is blowing through the fabric of Europe, pumping oxygen into its sometimes glued layers and allowing the chemical workings to unfold, making reddish brown oxidated letters reappear in the script of Europe, forming new words and calling for other practices of reading Europe.

Notes

1. A limited number of studies have turned their attention to the EU-level too (Silvestri 2009; Fokas 2007). However, a critical investigation of how the EU-sphere is marked by “whiteness” and its various colonial entanglements is missing in these analyses, which is part of the second shift this paper advocates for.

2. Another important and often neglected perspective in the debates on “Islam in Europe” is that of so-called “Eastern European” states, where the presence of Islam long predates the topics and debates associated with “Islam in (Western) Europe”. I do not mean to reproduce a western-centric analysis of Islam in Europe, but for the sake of bringing more focus to the following discussion I have decided to not further elaborate on this perspective in this article. For our interests here, it is however relevant to note that, while there is a different genealogy of Muslim presence in these regions, we may also recognise that their entanglement with (other) colonialisms show Orientalist tropes and that eastern European regions benefited from colonialism in their own ways (Bhambra 2009, 73; Dezenovska 2013)

3. I use the term “white” to refer to a multi-layered mechanism by which frames of identification are being produced that generate “white” and “non-white” bodies and attribute them with naturally given abilities and qualities. In this process of “racialization” a hierarchisation of groups of people along markers such as skin colour, religion and “ethnicity” stratifies the social space and invests “white” bodies with power (Goldberg 2006; Wekker 2016).

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