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Astrid Korporaal

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ARTICLE

THE TOUCHSTONE OF VISION: REMEMBERING THE INDIGENOUS GAZE IN 'STONES HAVE LAWS'

ASTRID KORPORAAL
Kingston University, United Kingdom

Abstract

This article looks at the Dutch and Surinamese Maroon film *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti,* 2018), as an example of unlearning colonial modes of perception, authorship, participation, and framing reality, through transcultural collaboration. Exploring the tension between the image as document and as medium, I look at the ways this project interacts with the history of ethnographic filmmaking in its observational, reflexive, and participatory forms, and the postcolonial notion of the returned gaze. Connecting Indigenous, decolonial and phenomenological theories of the reciprocity of vision and plurality of lifeworlds, I argue that this work demonstrates how the image can act as a reminder of the ways our senses and conceptions of reality are interrelated with that of more-than-human beings and environments. Translocal collaborations call on both filmmakers and viewers to co-create a vision that is shaped by multiplicity, consent, temporal commitment, and contextual grounding.

Keywords: Decolonial, Pluriversal, Aesthesis, Opacity, Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

The film *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti,* 2018), was created over four years of collaboration between Dutch artists Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan, Surinamese theatre maker and poet Tolin Alexander and more than 50 members of the Saamaka and Okanisi Maroon communities of Suriname. The different Maroon communities in Suriname are descendants of escaped slaves of African origin from the Dutch colonial plantations. Although they are not the original inhabitants, they continue a particular Indigenous model of reciprocity with the Surinamese rainforest ecosystem through their combination of survival methods taught to them by the Indigenous Amerindian tribes and cultural practices preserved from the African continent. As inheritors of a visual literacy that promotes a balanced relationship between the human community and the wider surrounding community of beings, the Maroons have a lived sense of the importance of shared modes of perception. However, they have also experienced their images being appropriated and circulated by journalists and artists without their explicit consent, without their voices, and without benefits that might support their communities' continued existence. Taking these complex histories into account, the challenge of developing a form of collaborative filmmaking involves an engagement with the question of decolonising vision.

Decolonisation can be understood as undoing both the colonial appropriation of lands and oppression of its inhabitants, as well as the colonial modes of thought and perception that enable this violence. This involves restoring colonised and Indigenous peoples' relationships with their ancestral lifeworlds, and refusing the settler-colonial logic of appropriation, extractivism and territorial ownership. Image-based media are increasingly being mobilized to strengthen appeals to decolonisation and give visibility to the colonised and Indigenous peoples of what Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash call the "social majority."[1] These communities are engaged in grassroots processes of "commoning" societal relationships in ways inseparable from relations to nature.[2] Much has been written about Indigenous media projects that aim to claim space in the global media landscape and re-humanize the representation of those marginalized by the Eurocentric, colonial vision of the world.[3] Less has been written, however, about the potential for collaborations between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous filmmakers as a mode of decolonial practice.[4] Is it possible for members of these communities to develop a common approach to image-making, while acknowledging the legacy of the camera's use in colonial projects of extraction, appropriation, and erasure?

As decolonial theorists such as Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez have shown by drawing on work with Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Abya Yala/South America, the conceptual divisions between subject and object; mind and body; rational and emotional; human and non-human categories of

experience that characterise modern thought are deeply intertwined with the colonial project.[5] This project divides the world along hierarchical lines, establishing the rational, modern, patriarchal, and individualised Western subject as the pinnacle of civilization. David Abram connects this conceptual duality to the loss of our collective sensibilities and perceptual reciprocity with the more-than-human environment. Arturo Escobar describes this loss as the "ontological occupation" of lifeworlds that trains us to become separated from other beings and shape our bodies and worlds according to a single vision of reality.[6] Furthermore, as Ariella Azoulay argues, these hierarchical methods of framing, separating and splitting forms of reality have been inscribed into the function of the photographic image as imperial document.[7] Thinking with these authors, we can argue for the importance of circumventing the dominant perceptions of our surroundings and rethinking the relationship between representation and reality.

The risks for colonized peoples in sharing their views of the world connect to the differences in vision and perception between pluralised, reciprocal conceptions of reality and what Escobar calls the "one world world", which "[…] disempowers the local and place based by locating the decisive power to change things in the global […]".[8] Can the camera and the moving image be used to reconnect filmmakers, protagonists, and audiences to a perceptual relationality with other lifeworlds and beings?[9] I argue that collaborative films such as *Stones Have Laws* can become a touchstone for a community of relation, which is shaped by plural consent, temporal commitment, and contextual grounding. Collaborations between makers on different sides of what Vázquez calls "the modern/colonial divide" can promote awareness of the intersections of different ways of seeing, expand our sensorium beyond our habitual frames and gestures, and create relationships that resist dehumanization and erasure.[10]

AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

In *The Spell of the Sensuous,* Abram tells a story of his time amongst the Indigenous healers or *dukuns* of the Indonesian archipelago, and later among the *dzankris* in Nepal. Abram observes that these ritual healers often live on the periphery of their village, not just for reasons of privacy, but because their knowledge of healing is deeply informed and infused by the natural environment at the edge of the human society. Abram argues that the powerful role of healers in different Indigenous traditions is grounded in their reciprocal mediation between the worlds of the non-human and the more-than-human. Abram states that Indigenous and animistic practices give insight into lifeworlds that are based on the inseparability of human and more-than-human entities, and the ways in which human cognition and embodied experience evolved in interdependence with other animals and environments. What has often been dismissed as "magic" or belief in "supernatural"

beings in the deterministic and mechanical thought of European Christian missionaries and anthropologists, is described by Abram as the ability to shift consciousness and "[…] make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined."[11]

In *Stones Have Laws*, the first images the audience are shown of the Maroon villagers at the heart of the film are set on the riverbank at the edge of the Surinamese rainforest. The film starts with images of the surging water, after which the camera pans to a small group of villagers seated in a circle by the river's edge. Inverting the familiar images of colonial 'discovery' that present indigenous peoples welcoming travellers to new lands, this image of encounter is paired with expressions of refusal and doubt. The villagers share with each other: "The part that I know, is there. Yet I don't want to tell it." / "Not everything can be said. An oath has been made that certain things should remain secret." / "We shouldn't tell things that we don't know well." / "That's true. I don't like: 'I have heard…' I like: 'I myself have seen…'" / "But the story they call history [geschiedenis], that is mostly a matter of: 'I have heard.'" / "These strangers may have come with bad intentions". In this scene, the resistance communicated by the Maroons echoes a communal understanding of the resonances between storytelling, truth, and commitment.

Throughout the film, the protagonists reflect on the filmmaking process by questioning which stories should be allowed to be recorded, and which should remain within the communities' protection. These discussions often refer to locations or events off-camera, reinforcing the sense that the oath to secrecy has been made to both the visible and the invisible environment. In colonial narratives, peoples living at the edges of modern society and the frontiers of Western discovery were presented as uncivilized and irrational. In *Stones Have Laws,* we see how the Maroons are fully aware of the ways visibility, transparency and access have been used in the surveillance and policing of their communities, as well as the extraction of their knowledges. The written or visual record, which plays an important role in modernity/coloniality as a method of mapping territories, establishing ownership, allocating rights, and appropriating resources, is treated with suspicion by the protagonists, who associate this function with violence. The audience is shown how these villagers reflect carefully on the intentions and consequences of their own and others' actions. Their process of deliberation includes remembering communal oaths made by ancestors, past betrayals, and current threats to ecological agents such as the river and the forest. Their location at the shoreline places the community in the midst of these relations, which inform their eventual decision to share some of their stories with the filmmakers and the audience.

The argument Abram makes for attending to the modes of perception, thought and storytelling of different Indigenous communities who retain their connection to the Earth as constitutive to their worldview and practice, carries resonances with political theorist Arturo Escobar's argument for "pluriversal politics". Stating that "another possible is possible", and drawing on the philosophies

and activism of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and autonomist communities in Abya Yala/South America, Escobar describes the importance of acknowledging and nurturing the existence of a world that holds multiple worlds. In order to imagine and embody alternatives to the modern, imperialist, capitalist, and extractive global system, he argues, we must move beyond the colonial one-world system. With the possibility of other lifeworlds come the possibility of other ways of relating, thinking, being and creating. From different disciplinary backgrounds, Abram and Escobar argue that a more open, pluralized, non-dualistic attitude to the world, although not the dominant mode in modern and Eurocentric societies, is a capacity that can be practiced and remembered by those who have been cut off from this reciprocity.

Arguably, the activation of the senses and widening of one's conception of reality is one of the main aims of artistic activity in contemporary society. Echoing the Maroons' concerns, we can ask if visual artists are able to take on a role resembling that of the Indigenous shamans who mediate between worlds, without slipping into mere appropriation of images back into the universalist, imperialist view of the world? The tension between approaches to the more-than-human environment as resource or as active element of common life echoes the longstanding debates about the definition of art as a commodity or as a public good. Furthermore, the technical reproducibility of lens-based images has created complex narratives about their relationship to reality. If technology is part of the problem of our narrowing senses, as "[…] we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies", can film and photographic art forms still play a role in expanding the sensorium?[13] How do Indigenous image-making practices interact with the history of technology, conceptions of realism and traditions of spectatorship? Can film and photography be used to "[…] think-live with a more complex and effective awareness of the inexhaustible teijdo (weave) of interdependence that sustains life and allows it to flourish […]"?[14] As we shall see below, these questions touch on the history of aesthetics, image-making, and visibility as it is intertwined with the logic of modernity and coloniality.

REWORKING THE OLD PRINCIPLES

In the globalized film world, critiques of the dominance of the Hollywood cinema industry and European art house films, as well as Western-dominated anthropological and ethnographic films have led to growing attention to Third Cinema and Indigenous-led media projects. In Abya Yala/ South America, for example, filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino produced a manifesto for a cinema grounded in the lived experience of colonized peoples. In these films, oppressed subjects could appear both in front and behind the camera, and influence not only the aesthetic framing of images but also their production

Figure 1.
Tolin Alexander, Siebren de Haan and Lonnie van Brummelen, *Stones Have Laws* (Dee Sitonu a Weti, 2018), Still.

processes in ways that reflect their political and social concerns. Cinema, as the art form of the masses, would transform from entertainment into "an active means of dealienation".[15] This was a method to counter the dehumanizing and objectifying gaze which only went in one direction: from colonizer to colonized. In a form of returning the gaze, films such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Glauber Rocha's *Terra em Transe* (1967) and Solanas and Getino's *La Hora de los Hornos* (1968) cast colonized peoples in active roles of revolution and class struggle, rather than as passive objects of visual consumption.

More recently, filmmaker Barry Barclay published a manifesto for a 'Fourth Cinema' or Indigenous Cinema. Barclay characterises the moving image works already produced and yet to be made under this description as giving "[…] examples at every turn of how the old principles have been reworked to give vitality and richness to the way we conceive, develop, manufacture, and present our films."[16] Avoiding a programmatic definition, Barclay states that he does not want to characterise Fourth Cinema by its "exteriority" or "surface features"; by the kind of images or content it presents to the viewer.[17] Instead, he characterises it through "something which is not easy to access."[18] This "interiority" comes from an alternative Indigenous base, which is constituted by reworking "[…] the ancient core values to shape a growing Indigenous cinema outside the national orthodoxy."[19] Where Third Cinema calls for films by and for the masses against the ruling class, Barclay calls for reaffirmation of an Indigenous view outside the modern nation state. As he argues, "[Indigenous Peoples] are outside the national outlook *by definition,* for Indigenous cultures are ancient remnant cultures persisting within the modern nation state."[20]

Barclay suggests that Fourth Cinema can combine modern technology with an outlook connected to communal and core values. Indigenous images are not presented as static realities, but as active ways of aligning with communal values. In *Stones Have Laws,* the Maroons refuse translation and resist explication in ways that do not erase or block the flow of possible meanings and interpretations. Plural

metaphors are used to express the multiplicity of their community. For example, their approach to working together with the Dutch artists is expressed by different members as: “We can’t tell everything to outsiders, but what we will tell may help us and the forest”/ “We know what we should tell, what we are allowed to tell and how far we can go”. By other villagers, more opaque statements are made, such as: “Don’t make waves like a motorboat” / “Never send the boat directly downstream” / "Don’t blow the horn.” As viewers, we can guess at the meaning of these sayings for a community whose lives are tied to the river. We can look for clues in the faces of the speakers as the camera follows their circle, and in the landscape at the speakers’ periphery. Meanwhile, the Maroons are aware of the filmmakers’ and the audience’s presence. Without preventing the conversation, they take precautions about which words and images might be overheard, appropriated, or mistranslated from their margins.

The Maroons distinguish between different kinds of storytelling, and the word for history is spoken in the Dutch colonisers’ language, as ‘geschiedenis’, rather than their own language. The word is jarring even without familiarity with Dutch or the Maroon creole. The listener feels it clashing with the intonation of the surrounding phrases, which follow the rhythm of African languages. The Maroons’ refusal to translate this word into their own language and rhythm of speech amounts to a refusal to harmonize with the colonizer’s use of language and storytelling. Because of this disharmony, the audience can understand that the Maroons are committed to a form of storytelling that allows for divergence, discussion, silence, and dissent.

The commercial film industry resists products that are not easily accessible. However, there is growing interest in Indigenous cultures as an alternative to the capitalist world system. We can see this reflected in the number of new Indigenous films, filmmakers and festivals that have emerged since Barclay’s publication. This interest in seeing other lifeworlds unfold on screen might shift into a more general questioning and reshaping of perceptual habits, especially if artists and filmmakers from non-Indigenous cultures also exhibit a commitment to facilitating other outlooks. In order to decolonise and pluralise cinema more widely, might it be possible to enact a “homeopathic politics” of the image, by healing and connecting multiple local outlooks rather than posing universal alternatives?[21] As audiences, can we pay attention to perceptions that are jarring or difficult at first?

REACTIVATING THE SENSES: AESTHESIS AND SENTIPENSAR

In the decolonial approach espoused by Mignolo and Vázquez, the first step towards restoring the different ways of being in the world that have been violated by coloniality is to recognize the role of modern aesthetics in this violence. To aid this process of recognition, they distinguish between the aesthetics and aesthesis.

They state that "[…] modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving."[22] Ontological and epistemic differences articulated through modernity/coloniality establish a hierarchy that places thought above sensibility and emotion. Theories of aesthetics regulate the senses through notions of good taste, categories of beauty, and principles of artistic quality, but beyond this also create a separation between rational, discerning beings and irrational beings.

Modern aesthetics is understood as a method of colonial control of knowledge and subjectivity. As Anibal Quijano observes, "[…] the Europeans generated a new temporal perspective of history and relocated the colonized population, along with their respective histories and cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was Europe. […] That perspective imagined modernity and rationality as exclusively European products and experiences. From this point of view, intersubjective and cultural relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a strong play of dualistic categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern —Europe and not Europe."[23]

Mignolo and Vázquez characterise aesthesis as a more open, synesthetic, and generalised awareness of the senses, touch, and perception, in which the senses interact without inherent judgements or boundaries. Developing aesthesis is not a theoretical exercise, as they state: "Decolonial aestheSis are processes of thinking and doing, of sensing and existing, in which the modern distinction between theory and practice has no purchase."[24] Escobar argues for a similarly pluralised mode of "sentipensar" or feel-thinking, in order to bring to life "[…] new notions about what is real and what is possible."[25] These strategies also resonate with the call for holistic meaning-making connected to Indigenous storywork, which "involves using the heart (emotions), mind (intellect), body (physical actions) and spirit (spirituality), as well as recognizing the relationships of these realms to oneself, family, community, land/environment and wider society."[26]

As transformative alternatives to the colonial frames of perception, translocal collaborations would need to involve these interrelated dimensions of meaning-making. This might involve reconnecting with reciprocal perception. As Abram argues, our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, both human and nonhuman. In imagining what others see, humans have learned to hunt, gather, hide, flee, attract, and repel different beings. Abram observes that "[o]nly by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms […]"[27] Rather than asking communities of the social majority to adjust their visions of reality to make them more accessible to a general audience, decolonial and pluralist vision would thus involve actively unlearning the dominant, normative frames of aesthetics. Before arriving at this turning point, however, collaborative

projects may encounter internal and external blocks to reciprocal perception, that are deeply interwoven with our conceptions of images and reality.

Figure 2.
Tolin Alexander, Siebren de Haan and Lonnie van Brummelen, *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti*, 2018), Still.

THE IMAGE AND AUTHORITY

The distanced view of interpretation, in the Western tradition of ethnographic film, allows the filmmaker, and by extension the observer, to take on the role of the expert. Azoulay sets out how documentary media are connected to the establishment of an imperial "visual literacy" that frames reality through the lens of racial hierarchies and extractive capitalism.[28] Reframing the history of photography, archives, and museums in terms of the imperial "shutter", she shows how this way of thinking and seeing enacts cuts and splits in the social fabric of humanity between present/past, citizen/noncitizen, perpetrator/victim. As she states, "Everything is done to make sure that those affected by the shutter will no longer be able to come together with the others the shutter has confined to other spaces and well-differentiated categories."[29] Characteristics attributed to photographic and filmic images such as immediacy, distance, reproducibility, automation, and universal accessibility, are also used to justify colonial authority.

Filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch is regarded the father of participatory documentary and cinema verité, which question the authorial function of ethnographic film. In his experimental films, most of which were made in Africa, Rouch moved away from the tenets of observational documentary, which include a distanced, static view of events, non-intervention by the filmmaker, and a seemingly neutral, authoritative voice-over. He foregrounded the role of the camera and the filmmaker in his productions, emphasising the playful, improvisational scenes that emerged through the visible presence of both during recorded social

events. His voice-overs and inter-titles included reflexive questions to the viewer about the status of the images shown and their relationship to reality, and films such as *Les maîtres fous* (1955) and *Moi, un noir* (1958) often combined fiction and documentary, echoing the tropes of Hollywood narrative films and adventure stories in African contexts. Playing with allegory and parody, these techniques were used in part to disrupt the asymmetrical order of the colonial gaze, in which the film subjects and viewers are relegated to separate realms, and to muddle the scientific authority of the film as document of reality.

Rouch predicted that these approaches, together with new technologies of portable filmmaking and instant feedback, would result in the camera passing "[…] automatically into the hands of those who were always in front of the lens. At that point, anthropologists will no longer control the monopoly on observation; their culture and they themselves will be observed and recorded."[30] As Matthias De Groof argues, the result of the reflexive turn can be characterised as a shift from representing objects to making the representation itself the object of filmmaking: "[t]he evolution goes from realism as a style, producing an illusionistic reality-effect, towards realism as a goal […]."[31] De Groof also observes that reflexivity's "'self-criticism' paradoxically legitimizes the practice which is being criticized."[32] Because the process of filmmaking is included in the frame of the documentary image, participatory documentary paradoxically seems more real or truthful to the viewer, while at the same time gathering more data to be studied. We could say that the authority of the objective scientist is replaced by the authority of the author-as-cameraperson, who stages, shapes, intervenes in and comments on the images he presents to the viewer.

Jay Ruby has suggested that "relinquishing" the camera to Indigenous subjects would be the culmination of the project of documentary and anthropology, and the solution to its dilemma of voice, authority, and authorship: "[w]ho can represent someone else, with what 'language', and in what environment."[33] The danger of this assertion is that it remains focused on representation as a right and an asset rather than a negotiation. A simplistic interpretation of this view might conclude that there is a single correct way to present certain people or places, and that a shift in authorship will ensure the audience's correct interpretation. We can question whether handing the camera to former ethnographic subjects heals the wound of the modern/colonial divide. Does this approach nurture plural relationships, or does it merely move the moment of possible appropriation from filming to screening?

FROM OWNING TO OWING: TRANSPARENCY AND OPACITY

For the Maroon communities, knowledge is not any individual's property, but an inheritance of their ongoing relationship with the beings of the rainforest. The lessons their ancestors learned from the Indigenous inhabitants when they first

fled into the forests from the plantations remain an important part of their stories. Their survival in relationship with the environment is connected to their openness to the perceptions and interpretations of a multiplicity of beings. They tell the filmmakers and the viewers how their knowledge of the jungle helped them to trick and escape the colonial plantation owners many times. They don't share the full story though; some details are omitted. They may be told later, or in another context, when the audience is more familiar to the community.

Figure 3.
Tolin Alexander, Siebren de Haan and Lonnie van Brummelen, *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti,* 2018), Still.

The discussions that informed the making of *Stones Have Laws* were thus reflections of a flow of inheritance. In Maroon and Indigenous traditions, young members of the community learn these stories part by part, depending on their level of initiation into community life. For each element of a story, the community members ask whether this should be shared with viewers or kept protected, because no single individual possesses the right to make a story accessible or to keep a story from circulating without considering the effects this might have on all the interconnected elements of the ecosystem. Both in the process leading up to filmmaking, and in the film itself, the elements of the story unravel with time and attention. The rituals of speaking by turn in a circle; of asking the ancestors and spirits for permission while explaining their intentions; and making time and space to include the voices of the river, the trees, and the animals, are not merely reflexive devices. They are key parts of a storytelling process that is shared amongst all these agents, rather than individually authored.

Different elements of stories are performed by different voices and protagonists in different locations, unfolding to include contemporary developments such as the rising water level, the increasing mining activities and clearcutting of the forest, as well as parts of the story of their ancestor's escape

from the plantation, of his first night in the rainforest, the community undertook to defeat the Dutch planters, and of rituals that are used to ask permission to cut a tree or to build a house. In this manner of telling, there is no harsh division between the past, present, and future, as lessons from the past are still relevant now, and the places where these events happen hold this knowledge still for those who pay attention and remember. The laws referred to in the title of the film, the laws of the spirits, ancestors, trees, and stones, are not dogmatic. They open spaces for interpretation and dialogue, for the collective movement of imagination into the future and the past.

To understand, at least in part, the laws that the Maroons uphold, viewers must move "from a logic of owning to owing".[34] In this logic, it is possible to see what Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant calls "the right to opacity".[35] Opacity is explained by Glissant as the right not to have to be understood on other's terms, and not to have one's cultural practices, beliefs and reality translated into a universalist vision of the world. Glissant calls on his readers to "[a]gree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."[36] Opacity is not obscurity. It involves resisting reductive forms of grasping and enclosure. By abandoning the ideals of a closed totality and full transparency, Glissant argues, we are brought closer to possibilities of relation.

In the case of *Stones Have Laws,* where the Maroons refuse to disclose their stories in full, the viewer does not receive access to a total picture of their lives. The partial images we do receive, however, along with this mode of opaque storytelling, can give us a greater understanding of the relations they value, and more possibilities of relating to their lifeworld. For example, after the scene where the Maroons decide to make the film together with the white artists, a scene is shown where the villagers perform a ritual to ask their gods for permission and protection during this endeavour. This scene is filmed inside a dark hut, where it is challenging for the viewer to make out anything more than hints of the act of pouring libations onto the earthen floor, and contours of some of the objects inside. The person performing the ritual is not shown. We only hear his voice as he calls on the god of the earth and the river god for approval to share stories passed on by the Maroon foremothers with the white people. Viewers who are part of the Maroon community will be able to recognize some of the elements, while others will only know that something secret is happening here. The filmic language pivots the viewer's perspective towards the relational elements that the Maroons form their communities with, echoing the ways the clans speak and see through, with, by and for the forest, earth, and river spirits. What is owed and returned to the community is a different notion of authorship, not based on ownership, enclosure, and transparency of information, but on an opaque inheritance which both opens to and protects relations.

Figure 4.
Tolin Alexander, Siebren de Haan and Lonnie van Brummelen, *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti,* 2018), Still.

IMAGE-MAKING AS RITUAL OF PLURALISED CONSENT

How does the shift towards an authorship of opacity, as described above, relate to the mechanical process of using the cinematic apparatus in storytelling? Does the camera's association with immediacy, automation and reproducibility undermine the attempt to emphasise relationality rather than the documentary function of capture? Catching subjects unawares has been a common trope in documentary photography and film, carrying the assumption that the unprepared subject would reveal more of their actual circumstances. Rouch's concept of the "participating camera" resisted this tendency.[37] He argued for the adaptation of the camera movements to the action, its presence becoming consciously included in the rituals being filmed by the ethnographer, and the cameraman being led by the camera to enter into a spontaneous "cine-trance" of participation.[38]

The notion that the observer is a participant in perception is something that Abram also emphasizes based on his work on the reciprocity of sensation. However, we could argue that the trance is only one, very specific, way of conceiving participation and agency, which in its use by Rouch also assumes the access of the filmmaker and the viewer into the communal space of ritual. The cameraman, in Rouch's words, is "[…] able to penetrate into the reality, rather than leaving it to unroll itself in front of the observer."[39] Rouch's method does not hide the camera's presence from the subjects or the viewer, but it does continue the assumption of that the camera's function is to capture events. The trance ritual can be described as a method of opening and widening perception, most often associated with dance or other physical exertion and mind-altering substances and rhythms such as psychotropics or drums. Yet there are other occasions that can open the senses or alter perception. Forms of listening and stillness also allow our perception to adjust to different surroundings and enter into relationship with them.

As film scholar Michelle Raheja has argued in discussing the Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk's *Atarjanuat, The Fast Runner* (2001), films can function to take the non-Indigenous viewer "hostage", by "[…] successfully forcing us to alter our consumption of visual images to an Inuit pace […] The slowness of the sequencing matches the patience one must have to hunt on the ice, wait for hours at a seal hole, traverse long distances on foot or in a dogsled, or battle more than five hundred years of colonialism."[40] Here it is the slow experience of time and the open landscape, rather than the fast-paced movement of images and responsive camerawork that disorients the viewer's habitual perception. In *Stones Have Laws,* this altering of pace applies both to the reception and to the production of the images. Throughout the filmmaking process, there were several moments of negotiation: first, after conversations with all the involved inhabitants of the villages involved in the film, the artists produced a script which was then shared with all the protagonists and adapted again. After filming and first edits, there was another round of input and adaptations in which all the collaborators were involved. Since the protagonists' performances were scripted, although based on their own words, style of speech, and choice context of speaking, the recordings of these stories are not viewed as spontaneous or confessional. Some scenes even seem quite static and theatrical, such as when a village captain declaims from atop a large rock, or a man tells part of a story in a circle, and then waits for everyone else to nod in agreement.

By scripting, rehearsing, and revising the words they use in the film, the human protagonists don't aim to fully occupy or control what is seen and heard inside the camera's frame. Instead, they hold open space for other voices to be heard. Their participation reflects a sense of reciprocity with the environment as an open circle, where the individual human body completes itself only in things and others in the encompassing world. The relative lack of human action in these scenes can be understood as a refusal to provide the non-Indigenous viewer with the easy access and entertainment expected from a commercial screening. Refusing to fulfil this expectation can be compared to the rejection of a false contract. As Audra Simpson argues, refusal "[…] offers its own structure of apprehension that maintains and produces sociality through time […] [it] points to its presumptive falsity of contractual thinking. With this, the notion of two parties knowingly abstracting themselves out of their own context to contract into an agreement."[41]

The final scene in *Stones Have Laws* takes place back on the shore of the river. Filmed from ground-level, or rather, stone-level, we hear several Maroons discussing the standard film industry production contract, presented to them by the Dutch artists. The terms are read out loud: signatories will release their right to ownership of the images in the film. One of the protagonists declares that this is the language of 'money country'. Another villager retorts that he feels he has been part of the process of making the film. This could be interpreted as praise for the

process of collaboration so far, or as critique of the contract's terms, which will limit ownership of the final product emerging out of that collaboration. A decision is made: the Maroons will take part in the film, but on their own terms. They will not sign the contract, because they have pre-existing agreements with the human and more-than-human beings in their community.

The refusal taking place in *Stones Have Laws* is of the understanding of reality in which it would be possible for the protagonists to abstract themselves from their lived environment and to speak for that environment in its totality. It is also a refusal of a reality in which viewers could be fully passive and disconnected from the images they perceive. By foregrounding the process of negotiation, the film shows how rituals of asking permission and consent from different entities can also be ways of articulating intentions and remembering reciprocal relationships. Some languages in the film, such as that of the drums the Maroons use to communicate with the spirits and through the jungle, are subtitled, while others are not. Not every viewer might understand the intentions and permissions signified by the sounds and gestures of the waters, the mists, the trees, the birdsong, and animal calls. This might cause the viewer to feel disoriented or uncomfortable, like a hostage in an unknown lifeworld. However, it can also throw the viewer back to their perceptual wits, asking them to feel-think their way through this world.

Without the aesthetics of false contracts and colonial expectations to frame the image, a plurality of beings and lifeworlds opens to relation. The image itself can become a medium of refusal, of return, and of remembering. The image connects us to this moment, a touchstone that keeps grounding the makers and the viewers, Indigenous, Maroon, migrant, settler, and visitor, in the more-than-human environment that shapes our perception. The moving image as touchstone is a moment to return to, where the possibilities of possibility are not fixed but open to other lifeworlds and connected in opaque relations to the past and the future.

CONCLUSION

To return to the main question of this article, is it possible for members of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to work together and find a common approach to image-making, while acknowledging the legacy of the camera's use in colonial projects of extraction, appropriation, and erasure? We have looked at the ways *Stones Have Laws* was produced in a collaborative process, and some of the difficulties encountered during this process. These difficulties are connected to the colonial legacy of violence that continues to work through in our aesthetic categories. These categories, as Mignolo and Vázquez show, frame the modern perception of the world and relationships between cultures in terms of dualistic separations.

Figure 5.
Tolin Alexander, Siebren de Haan and Lonnie van Brummelen, *Stones Have Laws (Dee Sitonu a Weti*, 2018), Still.

To find a different outlook and a common approach to image-making, then, we must move outside of the frames of aesthetics and reconnect with aesthesis and sentipensar, the reciprocal interconnection of the senses, thought and emotion, practice and theory. In *Stones Have Laws,* we see this enacted in the refusal to accept the objectives and expectations of the camera as document, which is associated with objectivity and authority through its establishment of distance, automation, transparency, and accessibility. Where familiar critiques of ethnographic film and documentary tropes espouse methods of participation and of passing on authorship the operation of the apparatus to further penetrate reality, decolonial approaches ask us to go further. In the case of *Stones Have Laws,* this means returning the gaze, and the image, to the formerly colonized subjects in a way that is contextually grounded in their vision of reality. Here, the image becomes a medium of communication and relation with the more-than-human lifeworlds that support the Maroon communities thought and survival. It takes shape through plural consent and requires temporal commitment to be understood. The image and the camera are used as touchstones, reminders to engage with a plurality of voices and visions, to respect the right to opacity and to remember what we owe to the reciprocal foundation of perception.

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1 Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 2.

2 Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism*, xviii.

3 See for example Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Faye Ginsberg, "Indigenous Media from U-Matic to YouTube: Media Sovereignty in the Digital Age," *Social Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (2016): 581-599.

4 Shohat and Stam pose an open question about this potential for collaboration toward the end of *Unthinking Eurocentrism.*

5 Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/ Decolonial Healings," *Social Text/Periscope* (15 July 2013). Abya Yala is the term used by many Indigenous peoples for the southern continent of America.

6 David Abram, T*he Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) and Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*, trans. David Frye (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), xxxi.
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