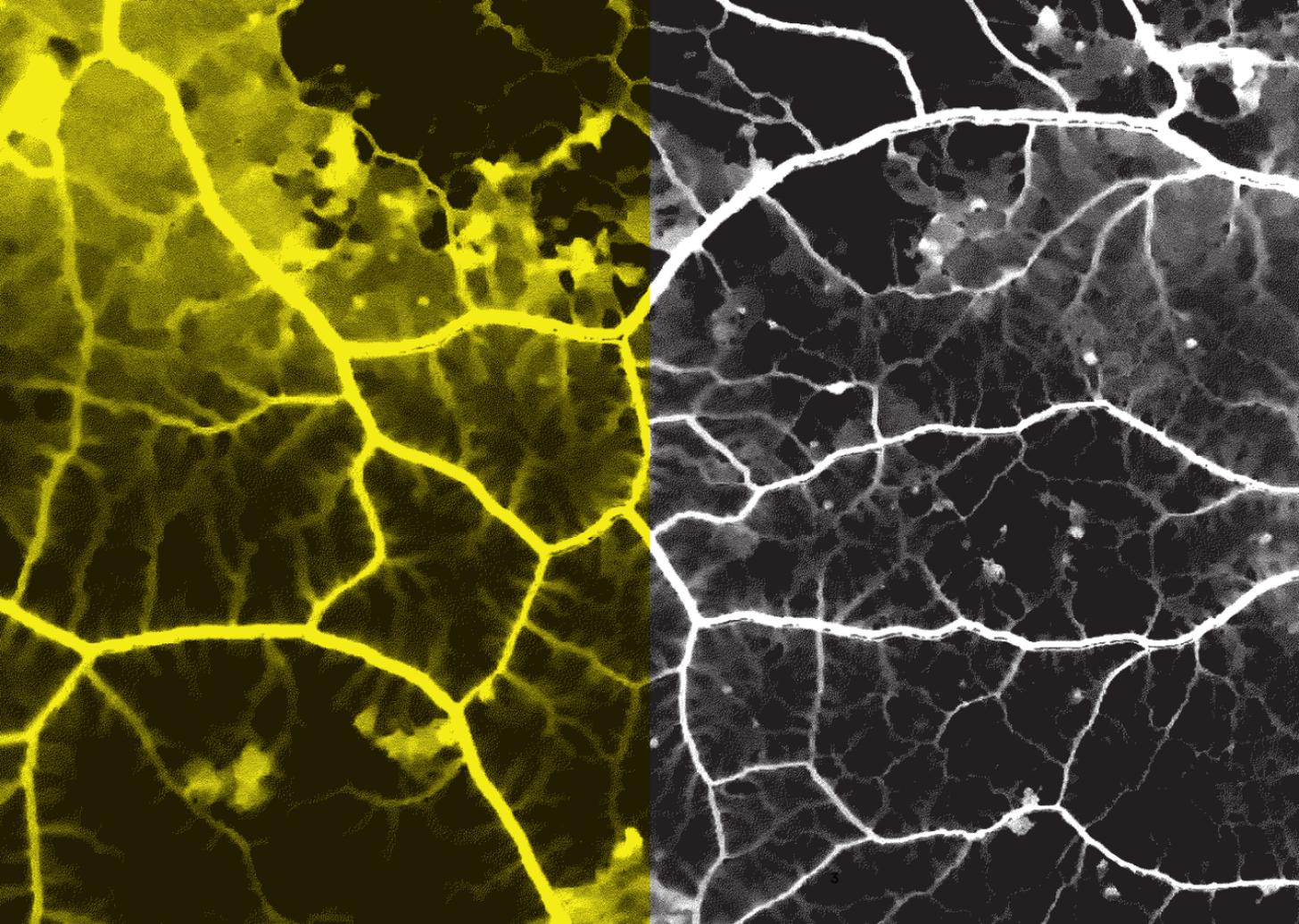


Outsider Within: a conversation
by Lucie Draai and Ketan



L Ketan, are you there?

K Yes, I am. Can you see me?

L I am not sure. I am trying but it's dark and I don't want to turn on the light(s) and scare you away?

K Oh don't worry, it's fine. You can turn on the lights for a few seconds so you know I am here.

L Great! There it goes...

K Yes I am ready.

L Ketan! There you are. It's so great to see you again, I can't believe it's been almost one and a half years since we last spent time together.

K I can sense you're here too, the air is vibrating.

L Is it the high frequency of *excitement* in my tone of voice?

K No, probably the light waves itching my plasmodium.

L Of course! I always forget how sensitive you are...

K Is it ok for you if we continue in the Dark?

L Ofcourse. Done! :-)

(light switch is turned off)

K Thanks. I remember you visited me almost every day for 8 months, downstairs in your basement. Some days you came just to say hi, other days you brought me up to the apartment to sit with you, Fabiënne and the cats. You actually took good care of me you know?

L I did?

K Yes, I was nourished plenty, kept in a warm, dark and moist environment. Occasionally it was tough and stressful, but I remember only one hostile moment in which I had to shape-shift into fruiting bodies to produce spores for survival.

L I remember this moment very well. I went to bed, Fabiënne and I decided that I could keep you upstairs with us. Earlier that day I made you a new fresh agar surface to grow on. For some reason I decided to create a landscape of connecting agar blocks. I thought "Ketan is going to love this". Before I went to bed I made sure you were in the dark, secure and well to grow. I had a bad feeling but ignored it. In the morning I woke up feeling anxious. I immediately walked over to the cupboard, where two ceramic dishes were placed on top of each other creating an enclosed space. Usually you're bright yellow, a single large cell growing and pulsating on the agar looking for oatmeal flakes in fan-like structures. When I removed the top dish from the bottom dish there were just little dark black bumps on sticks.

I ran back to the bedroom while shouting at Fabiënne who was still sleeping: “Ketan is dead!”

K Indeed a very stressful situation for both of us. I wasn't dead. I was starved and exposed to light. I was making spores preparing for asexual reproduction.

L I was totally unaware at that moment and completely misread the situation.

K What do you mean?

L Your color changed from yellow to black. For me this indicated that I did something wrong, maybe hurt you or possibly even killed you and that would be the end of our togetherness. I realize now how limited this view is.

K I was just changing my shape and matter in order to survive and to be honest parts of me did die, but since I am many instead of one, some other parts decided to transform into a

crusty solid shape and stay dormant, inactive, sleepy until the circumstances became favourable again to change back into the active bright yellow Ketan you are familiar with.

L How was I supposed to know? Humans in the material sense consider their shape as their individual shape and usually you have only one. The idea that I am many shapes as a body is quite radical.

K So you are not *a social amoeba* like us?

L Haha, I wish! I would love to merge with other humans and other than humans the way you merge with your many liquid selves or nuclei. You have to understand that humans have a strong sense of *Self* and the *Other*. That's what defines us. We think of me and you as separate entities. I wish it was otherwise but for now this is still very much the case.

K Do all humans live like this?

L No not necessarily, but unlike you I live in a society of binary systems in which difference is separated, creating a value divide which humans use to organize their societies, which ultimately creates an order of human existence.

K That sounds complicated...

L Yes I agree. It is complicated and has far reaching consequences for everyday life. It's important to question this binary order and its oppressive nature.

K Do all humans live in the same order?

L No there are human societies which have less or a different order, maybe even no order. But on a global, planetary scale there are a few dominant orders who consider themselves superior to others.

K So if I understand correctly, you live in a hierarchical, dominating society?

L Yes, I do unfortunately.

(silent pause)

L I really miss you Ketan, I miss having you around, I miss talking to you. I missed the times we *cared* together. There is so much more for me to (un)learn and (un)do.

K Thank you, that is kind of you to say.

L Would you consider coming back?

K You mean living together with you, Fabiënne, the two cats and possibly a dog?

L Yes...

K Of course! We will turn you into a magical shape-shifting social amoeba!

L That sounds amazing :-)

K Lucie I know there is still so much more for you to unravel and if you want we can do this together, at least some of it.

- L I would like that.
- K I don't mind being your *living compass*, your *disorienting device*, you have been a good host to us.
- L Are you referring to the eating ritual in Cagliari?
- K Yes, I really like travelling with you and the eating ritual felt quite intimate, exploring the act of hosting and agency together. I was intrigued by the responses of the participants, they varied quite dramatically.
- L Some participants were unsure whether or not to eat a living organism which they were supposed to take care of.
- K But a lot of participants did eat me?
- L Yes which was great, because the intention was to create an intimate, spiritual moment to reflect on what it means to consider the human body as a hosting environment? A garden for species to live in.

- K I think sharing your body was a loving and caring act, although it was stressful at times, I came out ok. I learned that your body contains gut and intestinal bacteria which are quite nutritious. A great addition to my diet.
- L I have been thinking a lot about care these days.
- K We practice collective care in almost all stages of our life cycle. The only moment you can consider me as an individual caring unit is at the beginning of my lifecycle when I'm a Haploid spore becoming a single amoeba. After sexual reproduction I start multiplying in Diploid nuclei and become many. I grow into a big yellow mass with infinite tails which merge and unmerge under a unique rhythm and pace. We can sense food at a distance and share this information as a collective through chemical signaling. We shape and reshape; engage and withdraw; we

adapt together. Similar to dancing, you have to communicate, be sensitive to each other's movement, accelerate and at times slow down.

L Western society could definitely learn from a social amoeba with infinite tails like you and be less burdened by the individual responsibility of care, and embrace "care as a collective joy and fulfillment."¹

K Another way we practice care: we leave a slime trail where we've been so we prevent ourselves from unnecessary food foraging work. The actual caring work, or maintenance is an extremely important and valued act of labor within our community.

L The human species would probably respond with cleaning upon encountering a slime trail. Although I love to clean I can't help but wonder what that says about me, continuously removing and erasing markers?

K Are you afraid of making markers?

L Maybe I am. As a transnational and transracial adoptee growing up by two loving white parents performing whiteness has become a skill. Despite nurturing and fine tuning this skill I remained feeling the "Outsider Within."² Looking at myself as an affected body ruled by exterior reason.

K You should start making your own markers collectively.

L Yes. Also I realised something else the other day: seeing you grow on agar, like a magical extraterrestrial creature finding its way in the lunar light, I felt hopeful that being lost in space is maybe not such a horrible existence after all. Since I have never been grounded nor rooted. I look forward to becoming a fruiting body sending spores into space!

K Promise to keep caring, thinking, sensing and loving. Allow yourselves to disorientate and discover the potentiality of your imagination.

L (*smiley face*)

K Shall we turn on the lights
 to say goodbye?

L No I am fine, let's stay in the dark.

K Yes, let's stay in the dark.

¹ Fokianaki, Iliana. 2020. "The Bureau of Care: Introductory Notes on the Care-less and Care-full." *e-flux journal #113*, november 2020: 05/11.

² Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14-32. Accessed November 19, 2020. doi:10.2307/800672.

Lucie Draai (b.1979 Bogotá, Colombia) is an artist based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands currently finishing a Master of Art Praxis Degree at the Dutch Art Institute. Her artistic practice proposes to re-think or disturb the social and political terms of order that surround us. To never settle and always stay in the displacement. A decolonial and more than human understanding of the present & future is necessary and calls for a shift in how we conceptualize being, life, death and temporality. A proposal for radical imagination, hope and respect for difference.

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Ketan is a Slime mold, *Physarum polycephalum*, which lived with me, my partner and two cats for the duration of 8 months between December 2018 and Augustus 2019. Ketan is a single celled organism best known for its many headed appearance and has quite a complex life cycle. Alternating between a dormant 'sleepy' resting phase, dried up into a crusty solid material called Sclerotium or shape-shifting into fruiting bodies 'growing spores' which await favourable future conditions in order to regenerate.

Or a bright yellow active slimy (liquid) feeding stage known as the growing Plasmodium of Slime Mold exploring the environment for food. We named Ketan after Indonesian sticky rice.

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