Representability and the Afterlife of Violence

Theatrical Interventions, Embodied Archives, and the Ethics of Representation

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Dieser kollektive Beitrag hinterfragt die moderne Annahme einer allgemeinen Öffentlichkeit, eines angeblich ‚offenen Raums' für alle. Entgegen dieser Annahme enthüllen die Essays die Schattenseiten des Versprechens der Moderne und deren Verflechtung mit dem Kolonialismus, indem sie sich mit verschiedenen Dispositiven der Repräsentation auseinandersetzen. Leon Gabriel kritisiert den Kant'schen Universalismus sowie die kolonialen Grundlagen der Theatermaschinerie und fordert heterogene Formen der Weltgestaltung. Balindile ka Ngcobo führt den Begriff *Mbokodofication* ein, der beschreibt, wie die Körper Schwarzer Frauen zu politischen Objekten gemacht werden und dadurch das anhaltende Trauma verschleiert wird. Martina Groß betrachtet Dorothée Munyanezas Tanzperformance *Toi, moi, Tituba…* aus der Perspektive von Geschichtsschreibung als kritische ästhetische Praxis. Darija Davidović analysiert Kamilė Gudmonaitės Inszenierung *XÁTA – Zuhause* , deren Dramaturgie des Bruchs sich symbolischer Einheit und kolonialen Rahmenbedingungen widersetzt. Diana Rojas-Feile untersucht die ethischen Herausforderungen der Inszenierung von Zeugnissen aus dem kolumbianischen Bürgerkrieg und stellt dabei das Zuhören und die kritische Reflexion in den Vordergrund. Felipe dos Santos Boquimpani kritisiert die europäische dekoloniale Kulturpolitik und schlägt Alternativen vor, die in indigenen und afrodiasporischen Erkenntnistheorien verwurzelt sind.

How can art deal with violence without reproducing it? Many current artistic works engage e.g. with the possibilities of making silenced and suppressed voices audible. Also, the stage might be understood as an archive against

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forgetting, which can give space for people and events that have been denied by hegemonic power structures. But at the same time, the entanglement with the history of violence challenges aesthetic discourses as well as the writing of history.

Our joint contribution examines the connection between questions of representation and the increasingly discussed violent history of modernity. This has a great deal to do with 'open spaces': Contrary to a positivist view of the European expansion movement, we aim to scrutinise the modern assumption of a general public sphere, an 'open space' as such. Instead, the different parts of this contribution center on the dark sides of the promise of modernity and its inherent coloniality through working on various dispositives of representation.

Violence of Aesthetics and Sharing Worlds

Leon Gabriel

How is aesthetics inherently related to a history of violence? In his "Lectures on Anthropology" from 1781, Immanuel Kant explains the foundations for the legitimization of universalism through a logic of development of "peoples" (Völker) – although he excludes some 'peoples' from a full development, due to their "natural disposition".[1] Later, in the "Critique of Judgment" from 1790, this teleology is taken further when it comes to the synthetic potential of judgment. Among other things, the text states that the indigenous people of the Americas are "prospective human beings" ("angehende Menschen").[2] Thus, an "Iroquois" is seen as not capable of "pure disinterested pleasure".[3] Those passages are not a slip of the tongue: the 'possibility of civilization' is a central criterion for Kant considering the constitution of a human being.

Ruth Sonderegger emphasised that with the development of the 'discipline of aesthetics' and 'art' (in singular) as a category, a shift takes place from production to reception. For Kant and others, 'taste' has a particular importance, because taste is supposed to lead to the *sensus communis*. However, such a project of 'sensibilization' towards the common sense is again only possible for very specific people – because it is linked to their capacity for civilization.[4] At the same time, the *sensus communis* should make it

1 See Immanuel Kant: "Vorlesungen Menschenkunde" (1781/1782), Bd. 25: Vorlesungen Band 2, in: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (= Akademieausgabe), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997, 849–1204, here 1181; see Andrea Esser: "Grenzen der Kritik? Rassismus in Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft", lecture at Digitales Kant-Zentrum NRW, 29.11.2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPMzYS4lWW0&list=PL2lVo64M7r_b4q0-gFOv7iOppsAfSnaM_&index=9 (2.4.2025).

2 See Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Hamburg: Meiner, 2006, 287 (§67), translation L. G.

3 See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 49–50 (§2).

4 See Ruth Sonderegger: "Kants Ästhetik im Kontext des kolonial gestützten Kapitalismus", in:

possible to put oneself entirely in the place of the Other, i.e. to make a judgment qua formalizations, but to do so as a "subject without properties"[5].

The crucial point here is: The Kantian program of aesthetic sensibilization does not take place despite the crimes of the transatlantic slave trade, but precisely because of them. The new paradigm of aesthetics and the sphere of 'art as such' with its potential for emancipation form the ideological counterprogram to the violent subjection, dispossession and murder taking place elsewhere, in that both sides are legitimised in the same way, namely qua the logic of 'development'.

Of course, Kant's assumptions have been criticised many times. Seyla Benhabib recently pointed out that already the Kantian idea of thinking in place of the Other is presumptuous.[6] But it is more than that: This idea bears an inherent assumption of neutrality which is linked to the violence of objectifications. As often documented, the ideology of a civilizational difference was established through popular visual culture such as 'human zoos'.[7] The apparatus of display in this tradition assumes the neutral gaze, of seeing uninvolved and 'without properties'. But precisely through this un-involvement, the viewers' own position is to be consolidated. In the case of human zoos, it stabilises the position as a unified, 'white' people. To put it in a nutshell: The coloniality of the theatrical machinery lies primarily in asserting a neutral viewpoint that orders 'difference' according to its own scheme.[8] Also, 'objectification' ultimately means to cut off relations, as the example of looted artefacts from the former European colonies shows. They first had to be elaborately transformed into objects. Theatrical means such as lighting and small stages turned the things torn from their contexts into separate, exchangeable and therefore tradable goods – because they were cut off from their former relationships.[9]

Obviously, this assumption of neutrality as well as of unrelated objects is a myth. Instead, the 'pornotropic' element involved in the spectacles of subjection (such as human zoos or contemporary forms of othering) must be highlighted: the constant play of desire towards him/her/they – a point that Diana Rojas-Feile also elaborates on below. Even in the display of the abused bodies of for example Black women in the abolitionist campaigns of

Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft, Sonderheft 17: Sensibilität der Gegenwart, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2018, 109–125, here 122.

5 See David Lloyd: *Under Representation. The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 77–83.

6 See Seyla Benhabib: *Kosmopolitismus im Wandel. Zwischen Demos, Kosmos und Globus*, Wien: Mandelbaum, 2024, 38.

7 See Wulf D. Hund: "'Völkerschau' mit 'Kolonialwaren'. Die Popularisierung des Weißseins", in: *Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden. Kleine (Heimat)Geschichte des Rassismus*, ed. by Wulf D. Hund, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017, 97–114.

8 See for the instability, but effectivity of the construction of racial difference: Stuart Hall: *The Fateful Triangle. Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Cambride/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017, 53–68.

9 See Yaël Biro: *Fabriquer le regard. Marchands, réseaux et objets d'art africains à l'aube du xxe siècle*, Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2018.

19th century Europe, the same sexualised desire that had initiated these acts of violence lived on.[10]

It has become commonplace nowadays to 'situate' oneself. But such a once-critical consideration risks becoming a mere rhetorical exercise if it is not accompanied by a questioning of one's very own underlying desires. So, I am asking myself: How much of the increasing interest in academia and art institutions for Black and Indigenous positions (as if these would be generic entities) is driven by such desires? How much of my own interest?

With that in mind, I want to make a last, very shortened point: To repair the ongoing aftermath of colonial atrocities and other forms of subjection would not only be about repairing the harm done (= material or monetary compensation) or the destroyed relationships (= reconciliation).[11] The aforementioned Benhabib insists with and against Kant on the need to think of an "interactive universalism not only in the field of moral philosophy", "but quite concretely as a form of institution-building and world-sharing".[12] Such a 'world-sharing' that Benhabib mentions cannot rely on a notion of the world (as an assumed open space) as given – worlds are plural and contested, meanwhile the planet is shared by all of us in a highly unequally distributed manner. But to share different worlds could also mean to search for new and heterogenous 'worldmakings' that aim for other universalisms and particularly a more just future – be it through aesthetic or other practices. Of course, also this search bears a desire.

The Black female body as a site and repository of/for violence and its memory

Balindile ka Ngcobo

For the intellectual, "the one who diagnoses the episteme",[13] performing epistemic justice in the afterlife of violence consists of rising to the ethical responsibility to name this violence; to be conscious of how it is perpetrated; who benefits from it; and who repeatedly "does the work" of resisting and surviving it.[14]

To illustrate the spatial aspects of corporeality, culture, and subjectivity, I take up Leon Gabriel's above argument regarding 'objectification' and the

10 See Iris Därmann: *Sadismus mit und ohne Sade*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2023, 68.

11 For a 'constructive view' on reparations as third option see: Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò: *Reconsidering Reparations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 124 and 137–139.

12 Benhabib: *Kosmopolitismus im Wandel*, 38, translation L.G.

13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in: *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams/Laura Chrisman, New York: Routledge, 2013, 69.

14 See Brittany Boswell/Zimitri Erasmus/Sharlene Johannes/Samira Mahomed/Kopano Ratele: "Racist Science: The Burden of Black Bodies and Minds", in: *The Thinker*, 81 (2019), 4–8.

decontextualizing spectacle, a *dispositif* which I would argue changes and mediates the 'meanings' inscribed on and held by Black women's bodies.

South Africa is my primary point of reference. Still reeling from the legacies of colonization, slavery, forced removals, segregation, and other gross human rights violations, its postapartheid reality is marked by among the highest rates of Violence Against Women (VAW) globally. This violence must be understood not only as a direct result of apartheid but as a structuring feature of its aftermath.[15]

In the South African context, the trope of the 'strong Black woman' or 'Black woman as a rock' carries immense ideological weight. It first emerged during the 1956 Women's March against Apartheid pass laws through the protest song composed especially for the occasion. "Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo!" (IsiZulu: "you strike a woman, you strike a rock!") reminded women to harden themselves against the apartheid machinery.[16] Subsequently co-opted as the official slogan for women's organizations across the country, it remains prevalent.[17]

The trope became truly embedded in the national vernacular through the government's institution of a National Women's Day, celebrated on August 9th, commemorating the 1956 Women's March. Women's Day and certainly Women's Month in South Africa manifest as an annual spectacle enacted through print, broadcast and digital media; festivals, social initiatives and political rallies which form part of an elaborate dramaturgy attaching symbolic value to Black women's resilience. The slogan – severed from its original context and turned into a trope through public commemoration and political discourse—now functions as part of the apparatus that sustains postapartheid VAW. I term this phenomenon *mbokodofication*, comprising *mbokodo* (IsiZulu: "rock" or "boulder") and the English suffix *-fication* to describe the representational mechanism that transforms Black women's bodies into objects of political utility. To examine who benefits from this violence, I trace the symbolic and material afterlife of 'Sara' Baartman, the indigenous South African woman whose body was objectified, dissected, and displayed in Europe from 1810 to 1974.[18] Her journey can be read in three stages: first, her live exhibition in Europe; second, her posthumous display at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris until 1974; and third, the 2002 repatriation and burial of her remains in South Africa.

The 'meanings' inscribed onto Baartman and their shifts are clear to trace as her body – cut off from its original context – moved between London's

15 See Balindile Ngcobo: "Aesthetic Distance as Deus Ex Machina When the Performer's Trauma Is (Not Quite/Quiet)", in: *South African Theatre Journal*, 35 (2022), 3, 179–194.

16 See Hulisani Ramantswana: "Wathint' Umfazi, Wathint' Imbokodo, Uzakufa [You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock, You Will Die]: Dinah and Tamar as Rape Protestors", in: *HTS Theological Studies*, 75 (2019), 1, 1–8, here 4. https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5413

17 See Mabogo R. Maimela: *Black Consciousness and White Liberals in South Africa: Paradoxical Anti-Apartheid Politics, Doctoral dissertation*, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1999, 232.

18 Clifton Crais/Pamela Scully: *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, 154. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691238357

staged 'freak' shows and the curated museums of Paris. The restitution, however, raises critical questions around the spatialisation of violence and the representational logic of the new nation-state. Taking place during the period of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, the burial, on Women's Day of 2002 marked her re-entry into national consciousness as part of the 'foundational mythology for postapartheid South Africa'.[19] Her symbolic body was instrumentalised to represent closure and victory, even as violence against women continued to escalate. This highlights the fundamental ambivalence of open spaces – the reclamation and redefinition of the spatial context in which Baartman's body was situated – post-colonial and postapartheid South Africa – relied on the redefinition of the 'meaning' of Baartman's body; a move from objectified subjectivity, scientific specimen, to 'Grandmother-Martyr-Heroine'.

This strategic repurposing of Baartman's body enabled the cultural transmission of institutional memory and the performance of reconciliation.[20] If the 1956 Women's March saw the emergence of the 'rock' as a symbol, the 2002 burial saw the state sanction a surrogate rock –Baartman – through symbolic spectacle. This tendency to martyrise Black women as historicised figures of strength creates a national imaginary in which survival is aestheticised, and ongoing trauma is structurally ignored.[21]

This spatial logic of *mbokodofication* externalises violence onto the symbolic body of the 'strong Black woman', while obscuring its real, everyday manifestations. The momentary hypervisibility of the Black woman's body and her suffering, required for the spectacle of national reconciliation and resistance, echoes the mechanics of the freak show, the colonial exhibition and the anthropological museum. It is part of a representational infrastructure that continues to operate long after the formal end of colonialism and apartheid, reconfiguring the Black female body in public spaces, state discourse, and cultural production.

Just as in politics and in the broader public sphere, the paradox of representing or redressing violence without reproducing it haunts all cultural and artistic engagements with Black womanhood. If art participates in the remaking of historical memory and therefore in the project of worldmaking, how are epistemic and representational violence perpetrated through the dramaturgies of redress? Who benefits from the ongoing hypervisibility and objectification of the Black female body? These questions demand a conscious and ethical engagement with the spatial and symbolic configurations of Black women's bodies, as well as a critical interrogation of the power dynamics that underpin representation.

19 See Simone Kerseboom: "Grandmother-Martyr-Heroine: Placing Sara Baartman in South African Post-Apartheid Foundational Mythology", in: *Historia*, 56 (2011), 1, 63–76, here 64.

20 See Joseph Roach: *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 1–2.

21 See Kerseboom, "Grandmother-Martyr-Heroine", 71.

Munyaneza's *Toi, moi, Tituba…* – historiography as critical aesthetic practice

Martina Groß

I would like to continue our shared research by referencing a dance performance by Dorothée Munyaneza, a Rwandan-British artist based in Marseille. Her work engages with memory culture and the silenced voices of the archive, taking as its starting point Tituba, a Barbadian slave implicated in the Salem witch trials of the late 17th century. Long marginalised by historiography, it was not until the 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba sorcière… Noire de* Salem by the Guadeloupe-born French writer and comparatist Maryse Condé that Tituba was reintroduced into public consciousness, where she becomes a symbol of resistance against oppression.[22] In her performance *Toi, moi, Tituba…* Munyaneza honors Tituba as a representative of erased and suppressed voices. She creates a 'collective solo', a danced archive that counters historical erasure. Drawing on a text by French feminist philosopher Elsa Dorlin, who reflects on Condés's novel, Tituba, and her own ancestor Isabelle,[23] Munyaneza uses her body as a 'living vector' against forgetting – embodying lives denied by colonial systems. The piece first took shape during the *Dance Living Lab* 2021 at Chaillot – Théâtre national de la Danse, in residency with Dorlin and in collaboration with Iraqi-origin, Syrian-born musician Khyam Allami. After a performance at festival Sens Interdit in Lyon (17th of October 2023), Munyaneza described it as a 'piece-archive', where music, costume, and text turn the body into a resonant space of history.[24]

I propose to approach this work through the lens of 'historiography as critical aesthetic practice'. Such practice is self-reflective and self-critical, probing its own concepts and entanglements. Critique here is not merely discursive but political in action, confronting ambivalence and seeking controversy. By questioning the historicity 'of' and 'in' the arts and sciences, it aims less to reflect history than to intervene in it – a *ré-écriture* through intersectional perspectives that integrate theory and practice in the very act of performance.[25]

At the beginning of his essay "Of Other Spaces", Michel Foucault emphasises the spatial dimension of historiography, arguing that history should be analysed not only chronologically but also spatially. He recalls the 19th

22 See Maryse Condé: *Moi, Tituba sorcière… Noire de Salem*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

23 See Elsa Dorlin: "Me, You, Us: I, Tituba and the Ontology of the Trace", in: *Yale French Studies*, 140 (2022), 74–86.

24 See Dorothée Munyaneza: *Toi, moi, Tituba…*, premiere: 10.8.2023, Tanz im August, St. Elisabeth Kirche, Berlin, attended performance: 17.10.2023, Sens Interdit festival, Théâtre du Point du jour, Lyon.

25 See Martina Groß/Fiona McGovern (eds.): *Kritische ästhetische Praxis/Critical Aesthetic Practice*, Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2026.

Fig. 1: Dorothée Munyaneza performing *Toi, moi, Tituba…*,
© Dajana Lothert, 2023.

century's "obsession"[26] with history – an era also marked by colonial expansion and nationalist consolidation. Historicism, nationalism, and colonialism shaped historiography in exclusionary ways – especially from a theatre-historical perspective focused on practice. Theatre history also participates in the much-discussed historico-philosophical process that Walter Benjamin already problematised in early 20th century as a 'historiography of the victors' – history written from the standpoint of dominance.[27] Though Benjamin remains a classic of European critical thought and a major critic of modernity, it is no surprise that scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, with her method of critical fabulation, turn to him for exposing historiography's tension between construction and creation.[28]

Hartman's method is crucial here. For her, critical fabulation is "a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive."[29] It explores artistic and narrative strategies for responding to the violence of colonial history and its archival apparatuses.

26 Michel Foucault: "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", in: *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, 5 (1984), 46–49.

27 See Walter Benjamin: "On the Concept of History", in: *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, 255–266.

28 See Saidiya V. Hartman: *Scenes of Subjection. Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 14.

29 Saidiya Hartman: "Venus in Two Acts", in: *Small Axe*, 26 (2008), 1–14, here 12.

Fabulation does not simply fictionalise but inhabits the charged space between truth and intervention. As Foucault noted, fabulation once described a pre-modern narrative form later displaced by modernity's binary of fact and fiction.[30] Brecht, too, insisted on its centrality to theatre: "It is the fable that matters – the heart of the theatrical event"[31].

Returning to Munyaneza's dance performance, one scene stands out: The piece begins with meticulous precision. Fluorescent tubes stand like a sparse, luminous forest, dividing the stage into cold archives rising from the dark. A single violet tube catches the eye. Here Munyaneza enters: slowly, with deliberate lunges. She stretches her arms, bends them outward, lets them fall – always close to the light poles, never touching them. After circling the stage, she shifts direction, urgently lowering the tubes to the floor and arranging them in piles. In the newly gained opened space, she begins a sequence of gestures that recall measurement: thumbs and little fingers form units, the hand glides across the stage, quick wrist movements and turns seem to capture spatial dimensions. But measuring is never neutral – colonisation too followed the logic of precise calculation, of displacing peoples and places. Her choreography embodies what Elsa Dorlin, in her aforementioned essay on Maryse Condé's novel, describes as the "aesthetics of traces"[32] in the afterlife of the plantation.

Thus, Munyaneza's work invites us to consider what historiography might become when reimagined as a critical aesthetic practice – one that extends beyond the written word to include performance and choreography as legitimate forms of historical knowledge. Regarding *Toi, moi, Tituba…* that means also to understand historiography as choreography.[33]

30 See Michel Foucault: "Die Fabel hinter der Fabel", Bd. 1, in: *Dits et écrits/Schriften*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2001, 654–663.

31 Bertolt Brecht: *Schriften zum Theater*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1957, 165 (Kleines Organon No. 65); See also Julia Schade/Ruth Schmidt: "Kritisches Fabulieren", in: *IN TRANSFORMATION. 33 Jahre Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft. Arbeitsgruppen, Netzwerke, Positionen*, ed. by Elsa Büsing/Veronika Darian/Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer/Nikolaus Müller-Schöll/Raimund Rosarius/Hans Roth/Philipp Schulte/Ekaterina Trachsel/Sandra Umathum/Hanna Voss, Berlin: Herder, 2026 (forthcoming).

32 Elsa Dorlin/André Pettman: "Me, You, Us: 'I, Tituba' and the Ontology of the Trace", in: *Yale French Studies*, 140 (2021), 74–86, here 74.

33 The idea of bringing historiography and choreography into dialogue with each other is not particularly new. See for example Julia Wehren: *Körper als Archiv in Bewegung. Choreografie als historiografische Praxis*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2016.

Performing the Divide

Darija Davidović

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not only a military conflict; it is also a continuation of a long-standing imperial project to suppress Ukraine's cultural and historical plurality.[34] This ongoing violence draws on narratives that deny Ukraine's statehood and frame the war as a return to unity.[35] Madina Tlostanova describes this colonial logic as a strategy of "forced affinity"[36] – a form of Russification that, through violent assimilation erases memory, language, and belonging, reducing Ukrainians to a subordinate variant of Russian identity.[37] It is within this context of epistemic imperialism[38] that the staging of *XÁTA – Home* (orig. *XÁTA – Zuhause*), premiered on the 13th of October 2023 at the Münchner Kammerspiele directed by Kamile Gudmonaitė, is situated. The play addresses the Russian war of aggression from both Ukrainian and Russian perspectives: In the first part, Ukrainian performers sing traditional songs about mourning, loss, and the longing to return home while projections of testimonies bear witness to war, violence, and personal loss. They also wear T-shirts with political messages such as "Russia is a terrorist state". Among the projected testimonies is that of a young veteran in a wheelchair, who reflects on his life before the war as a boxer aspiring to start a professional career in France, and recounts how he came to lose his legs at the front. The second part turns to the Russian ensemble, where dancers perform the Beryozka under stark white light. Initially marked by discipline and precision under a ballet master's guidance, the dance gradually unravels into the grotesque as music and choreography fragment, exposing inner fracture and collapse. Throughout, the stage remains divided; the groups never appear together. This separation exemplifies what I call a 'dramaturgy of rupture': a refusal to stage symbolic unity, which lies at the core of *XÁTA – Home*'s aesthetic and political intervention. By foregrounding division, the play resists the Western "desire for reconciliation together with a patronizing attitude towards Ukrainian positions".[39]

34 See Maria Popova/Oxana Shevel: *Russia and Ukraine. Entangled Histories, Diverging States*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023.

35 See Kseniya Oksamytna: "Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine", in: *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44 (2023), 4, 497–512, here 505. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661

36 See Madina Tlostanova: "The Deadlocks of Memory and the (No Longer) Post-Soviet Coloniality, or Can Memory Be Decolonized?", in: *Baltic Worlds,* 17 (2024), 4, 57–66, here 58, https://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/BW-2024.4.p.57_66.Tlostova.pdf (04/05/2025).

37 See Tlostanova, "The Deadlocks of Memory and the (No Longer) Post-Soviet Coloniality", 62.

38 Imperialistic violence describes Russia's colonial denial of Ukrainian sovereignty and identity. See Tereza Hendl/Olga Burlyuk/Mila O'Sullivan et al.: "(En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of 'Westsplaining' and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine", in: *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45 (2024), 2, 171–209, here 172. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468

39 See Kateryna Botanova: "The Art of Misunderstanding", in: *Eurozine*, 24.5.2022, https://www.eurozine.com/the-art-of-misunderstanding/ (04/05/2025).

'Rupture' marks an irrevocable break with the status quo, rejecting imposed unity and the colonial frameworks sustained by the ongoing violence.[40] It also opens an 'open space' of dissent, where differences remain visible and negotiable rather than assimilated into symbolic unity.

Biographical interviews conducted as part of my research on theatre about Russia's invasion showed that this division was not originally intended. The Ukrainian performers' refusal to share the stage was understood not as personal rejection but as a politically and emotionally necessary act, a refusal of symbolic unity rooted in the colonial narrative of an enforced uniform identity.

Grounded in refugee and exile testimonies, *XÁTA – Home* embodies Avishai Margalit's notion of "moral witnessing", where personal testimony prevails over legal frameworks and carries the responsibility to speak in the name of the dead and the oppressed.[41] These testimonies are staged not to resolve or harmonise but to foreground division and loss as irreducible, at least for now. Consequently, *XÁTA – Home* does not confine itself to representing trauma. Rather, it reconstructs the identity of those bearing witness through performed memory, echoing Ángel Loureiro's idea of autobiographical narration as self-creation, where the act of narrating one's life actively shapes the self.[42]

This shift from memory to public presence aligns with Tlostanova's 'decolonial aesthetics', an artistic practice that resists colonial frameworks and enables space for 're-existence', understood as a creative and embodied reclaiming of memory and the imagining of alternative futures, a process that applies to both Ukrainian and Russian performers.[43] In line with Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, the performance constructs a complex archive of displacement, trauma, and entangled histories of violence that lay bare the multifaceted nature of Russian political violence and bring layered memories into relation.[44] It's dramaturgy reflects broader tensions within the cultural field in response to Russia's war of aggression. As Lina Kirjazovaite notes, many Ukrainian artists currently navigate between artistic autonomy and political responsibility. Some act as cultural diplomats while facing Western pressure to perform unity.[45] *XÁTA – Home* resists such harmonization while remaining embedded in international

40 See Tony Perucci: "What the Fuck is That? The Poetics of Ruptural Performance", in: *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 5 (2009), 3, 1–18, here 5, http://lisminalities.net/5-3/rupture.pdf (04/05/2025).

41 See Avishai Margalit: *Ethik der Erinnerung. Max Horkheimer Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2000, 60.

42 See Angel Loureiro: *The Ethics of Autobiography: Replacing the Subject in Modern Spain*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000.

43 See Madina Tlostanova: *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 29–30.

44 See Michael Rothberg: *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 202.

45 See Lina Kirjazovaite: "Art and Culture at War: Reflections from Ukraine", in: *Creative Unite*, 2023, https://creativesunite.eu/article/art-and-culture-at-war-reflections-from-ukraine (04/05/2025).

performance circuits that often reinforce these expectations. It does not seek unity through embodied memories of shared oppression but employs separation as an aesthetic and political response to the colonial logic of Russia's imperial war.

Centering testimony, it resists expectations of reconciliation that cast testimony as a gesture of unity, challenges imperial narratives of cohesion, and insists that dissent must come first. Rupture becomes a necessary stance amid ongoing violence and the opening of a space of negotiation rather than premature reconciliation.

Ethical and Aesthetic Challenges of Staging Testimonies from Colombia's Civil War

Diana Rojas-Feile

In my artistic-based research project, I am developing methodologies to visualise the experiences of Colombian ex-combatants who were forcibly recruited as minors by illegal armed groups. The project addresses their complex social positioning – often seen simultaneously as victims, witnesses, and, in some contexts, as perceived perpetrators.

How can we represent these individuals – some of whom have taken lives and are now in the process of reintegration – without reinforcing reductive labels? They are 'living archives of conflict', carrying memories that defy the binary of victim and perpetrator. As Sibylle Schmidt asks: "If we uncritically believe perpetrators, aren't we almost complicit with them? (…) Can their testimony lead to moral insight and reconciliation, or does it only offer another chance to humiliate survivors?"[46]

The question of how 'violence is represented' is crucial – because it defines who gets to speak, whose story is told, and by whom. To better understand these dynamics, I examined how minors recruited into armed groups have been portrayed throughout history.

According to Volker Barth, these representations have evolved – from monuments and paintings to photography, film, television, and literature – over three successive, though sometimes overlapping, phases: heroization, anonymization, and victimization.[47] These shifts reflect changing societal views on childhood and war.

In German-speaking performing arts, the narrative of helpless, instrumentalised, indoctrinated minors – forced to commit atrocities under threat of violence – still dominates, while their direct, unfiltered voices

46 Sibylle Schmidt: "Können Täter Zeugnis ablegen? Über Täterzeugenschaft in Joshua Oppenheimers 'The Act of Killing' (2012) und 'The Look of Silence' (2014)", in: *Zeugen in der Kunst*, ed. by Sibylle Schmidt/Sybille Krämer et al., Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016, 197–209, here 198, my translation.

47 See Volker Barth: "Kindersoldaten", in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 48 (2022), 2, 301–311.

remain largely absent. This absence drove me to Colombia to listen firsthand and learn how artists in the Global South are engaging with these narratives.

Colombia has endured one of the longest and bloodiest internal armed conflicts in the Western Hemisphere, spanning nearly 70 years and claiming at least 363,873 lives.[48] Over 18,500 minors were recruited into this war, which, despite a formal peace agreement (2016) between the guerrillas and the government, is still far from over.

Now, I would like to briefly address my perspective – that of an artist who, through ethnographic research, engages directly with the field to hear voices that are rarely heard. These environments are not an 'open space' that is easy to access; they require the establishment of trust and come with high expectations. In early 2024, I met in Bogotá with 23 former combatants recruited as minors, as well as local artists, researchers, and war survivors.

Some challenged the ways of thinking I had developed during 20 years in Europe, questioning whether I could truly act as a bridge between the Global South and North.

As an artist born in Colombia and now living in privileged Switzerland, I encountered scepticism, which I welcomed by listening carefully and continuing my research. Even of addressing structural racism in European art institutions does not automatically make my work decolonial. Still, with cautious optimism, I shared my decolonial attitude I have been intuitively developing. Yet as a researcher, I now question whether postcolonial perspectives are even possible within the German humanities and social sciences – what Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela describe as a 'mission impossible'.[49] Azadeh Sharifi and Lisa Skwirblies point out that self-positioning and autoethnographic writing, both central to decolonial work, are still largely dismissed as 'unscientific' in these contexts.[50]

Local knowledge demands not only decolonial thinking but also the practice of "do no harm". Artists must reflect on how their projects affect survivors, balancing past trauma with the risks of re-victimization.[51] A psychosocial approach is vital – yet is such awareness present in today's artistic portrayals of war testimonies, or do they risk causing further harm?

48 See Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica: "El conflicto en cifras", in: *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, http://micrositios.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/observatorio/portal-de-datos/el-conflicto-en-cifras/ (01/09/2025)

49 See María do Mar Castro Varela/Nikita Dhawan: "Mission Impossible: Postkoloniale Theorie im deutschsprachigen Raum?", in: Julia Reuter/Paula-Irene Villa (Eds.), *Postkoloniale Soziologie*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015, 303–330. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839409060-014

50 See Azadeh Sharifi/Lisa Skwirblies (Eds.): *Theaterwissenschaft postkolonial/dekolonial. Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2023, 18.

51 See Unidad para las Víctimas (official document of the Government of the Republic of Colombia): *Metodología para la Transversalización del Enfoque Psicosocial. Código: 400.08.20-13. Proceso Reparación Integral, Versión 02. Procedimiento Enfoque Psicosocial,* Bogotá: Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2021, 6, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/41.1.-METODOLOGIA-PARA-LA-TRANSVERSALIZACION-DEL-ENFOQUE-PSICOSOCIAL-V2.pdf (01/09/2025).

Another challenge: the 'field' seems exhausted by interviews and projects that offer no direct benefit, and mistrust toward researchers and artists is growing. People fear their stories will be exploited, manipulated – or used as propaganda. In war zones like Colombia and on major European stages, some artists have profited from projects framed by politically charged slogans about war, while European audiences seem fascinated by conflict.

Documentary filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo warned Colombian artists with their concept of *Porno Miseria*: "Misery was being presented as just another spectacle, allowing the audience to ease their guilt, be moved, and feel reassured."[52]

Their critique remains urgent. As Susan Sontag observed, "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain."[53] Showing pain always invokes responsibility – one I take on through ethical listening[54], critical reflection, and forms of representation that acknowledge violence without reproducing it.

De?colonial Apparatus of Representability

Felipe dos Santos Boquimpani

One discourse underlying European decolonial policies in the arts can be formulated as the necessity of including the subalternised in spaces of representation. It all goes as if there would be one single public sphere to be perfected by its late openness to the previously excluded. The problem becomes though evident when reparative integration insists on subjectification through marks of violence and racialization, overlooking any aesthetic and metaphysical creativity or potential universality cultivated beyond and that might subvert Western modern frameworks. European politics of epistemic inclusion thus raise the question whether the ceding of space to the so-called subalternised serves not openness but immunisation – and then, from what radical transformation?

Two productions instantiate a *dispositif* in this transnational scene: *Antigone in the Amazon*, by the Belgian-based Swiss director Milo Rau,[55] and *After the Silence*, by the French-based Brazilian director Christiane

52 See Luis Ospina/Carlos Mayolo: "¿Qué es la pornomiseria?", flyer on the occasion of the premiere of *Agarrando pueblo* at Cine Action République, Paris, May 1979, Reprinted in *Cuadernos de cine colombiano. Nueva época: Carlos Mayolo*, Cinemateca Distrital – Gerencia de Artes Audiovisuales del IDARTES, Bogotá: Cinemateca Distrital/IDARTES, 2015, 43, https://idartesencasa.gov.co/sites/default/files/libros_pdf/cuadernocinecolombiano2015.pdf (01/09/2025).

53 See Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, 7.

54 See Juan Pablo Aranguren-Romero: "The Researcher in the Face of the Unspeakable and the Unmentionable (An Ethics of Listening)", in: *Nómadas* (Bogotá: Universidad Central), 29 (2008), 20–33.

55 Milo Rau/NTGent: *Antigone in the Amazon*, premiere: 13.5.2023, NTGent, attended performance: 23.9.2023, Kaserne Basel.

Jatahy.[56] Both were funded exclusively by European cultural institutions, rehearsed in Brazil with local actors, notably Black and Indigenous, and taken on tour through Central-, North-, South-, and West-European co-producing theatres and festivals. In their commercial final form, neither has ever been performed in Brazil. Beyond parallels in production modes, both stagings assemble corresponding elements in similar configurations with equivalent effects. They include factual accounts of rehearsals, family and community life, a corner for live Brazilian music, and three vertical screens projecting reenactments of gathering, protest, and mutiny. Both play a game between reality and fiction, mythical narrative and documentary, denunciation of violence and emotionality. The central event of both plots is the assassination of communitarian land rights activists either by the military police or at the behest of local oligarchic land usurpers. In both cases, the dramaturgical and scenic apparatus is structured on the question of how real the represented violence is. But neither addresses coloniality by European interests and framework.

In both stagings, while the autochthonous character of the Brazilian performers sustains a republican legitimization of the production – real subalterns speaking of their own experiences and struggles –, it also authenticates the colonial idea of the 'Other' of a 'Europe' as a territory of violence. By triggering outrage and awe from safe distance, both stagings promote a separation of the audience from historical colonial violence, while the proximal presence of Black and Indigenous representatives' functions as living evidence of far places insufficiently civilised.

Symptomatically, the Tariano actress Kay Sara, cast as Antigone, left the production just days before the premiere. The inconsistent redistribution of Antigone's lines among the remaining actors reveal an attempt to cover her flight. But there is no escape. The production of insubordinate subjects through the vanishing line of the *dispositif* vectorises its very form of subjection.[57] While the European performers try to romantically explain her absence by a longing for communitarian life in the forest, Kay Sara still appears in a projection shouting repeatedly to the camera: "Let me in peace! Go away!" Her ghost keeps appearing by force of legal contracts as a vanishing point of a European imagination. For the exemplary circulation of titles of racialised will for freedom is constitutive of (neo-)liberal self-consciousness as cultural assets.

If escape belongs to the colonial trap, which conceptual and practical arrangement can balance transnational praxis? Maybe the modern subject's political-theological origin can be merged in a fractal shamanic personhood.

56 Christiane Jatahy: *After the Silence*, premiere: 15.6.2022, Wiener Festwochen, attended performance: 19.11.2023, Kulturhuset Dieselverkstaden Stokholm.

57 See Gerald Siegmund: "Powerlessness and the Aesthetics of Theatre and Performance", in: *Performance Philosophy*, 7 (2022), 1, 22–26.

That's why my approach shall draw on controlled equivocations:[58] counter-translating, through proper indigenous concepts, the conditions of audibility, readability, and visibility of aesthetic manifestations in guarded spaces of modern/colonial representation. For while representation presupposes the integration of living humans in a communicative community forming an otherwise inexistent commonwealth,[59] Amerindian and Afro-Diasporic epistemes seem to be grounded not in the same political-theological *corpus* but rather in dispersed embodiments of the absents from the realm of the living. It remains to be investigated if these cosmopolitical notions of ancestrality – another case of equivocations – is being mobilised, (also) by the persisting Metropole's curatorship, in an identitarian and therefore ethnocentric and proto-nationalist way.

To remain with a question of the translatability from representation to incorporation of ancestors, let's return to *After the Silence*. Because of a dramaturgical process more dependent on the contributions by the invited Black actors, the dramaturgical line of flight was constituted around the *Jarê*, an Afro-Brazilian religion formative to both one of the literary sources of the play, the novel *Crooked Plow*,[60] and the actresses Gal Pereira. In the end, it is she who incorporates the enchanted *Santa Rita Pescadeira*. But there are more reasons than usual theatrical conventions to say that it is the enchanted who then dances and speaks through the performer's body. One could speak of an externalizing, that is, a depersonalizing work beyond the temporality of trauma. Or, as José Fernando Peixoto de Azevedo puts it: "From the many historical time zones that co-form that state [of trance], gestures, voices, speeches, syntaxes emerge [that] no longer foretell the present's many futures but indicate *pasts we are yet to live.*"[61] While this might haunt some, the ancestor's timely crossed presence opens up a virtual figure, which the living can embody without conflating existences. But to say that in the episteme of the *Jarê* the living are put side by side with multiple body-temporalities, enabling non-surrogative techniques of transmitting knowledge and agency, also implies a political institution. For the question is: if we consider ancestry as a political technology – at least as ancient and modern as theatre, academia and democracy –, will transcultural artistic processes give rise to reciprocal transmodern discourses and institutions?

58 See Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro: "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation", in: *Tipiti*, 2 (2004), 1, 3–22.

59 See Giuseppe Duso: *Die moderne politische Repräsentation*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011, 29–37.

60 Itamar Viera Junior: *Crooked Plow: A Novel*, trans. Johnny Lorenz, London/New York: Verso Books, 2023.

61 José Fernando Peixoto de Azevedo: "Letter to Lepecki – post-cannibalization and fugigraphies of the future", in: *Women & Performance*, 31 (2021), 2, 156–172, here 163, emphasis in the original.