the

FEBRUARY

journal

Issue 03. Decolonizing the Self: How Do We Perceive Others When We Practice Autotheory?

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Editorial. Two Dialogues on Self-Decolonization

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This editorial comprises two of the conversations that the issue's editors have had during its preparation. The work involved numerous exchanges and discussions, and not only between the two editors, but among all *The February Journal*'s team members and the issue's authors, but these two dialogues mark the starting point of our engagement with this topic, and some kind of an interim conclusion, at least what pertains to the contributions presented here. The first conversation took place in late February 2023 and was published on 16 March that year. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had been going on for over a year, bringing unfathomable violence, and we had just founded this journal, which gave us a tiny sense of purpose. It is first and foremost from this place that we were speaking when formulating the issue's topic. It is our new awareness (as painful as it is to admit it) of the necessity to decolonize/deimperialize ourselves that was driving us, even though the eventual CfP was addressed to a broader public. We have chosen to publish this first conversation in an almost unchanged form, to indicate where we were coming from: on a few points we have elaborated, some verbs have been changed to the past tense, to ensure an easier read, but the core of the dialogue remains intact. The second conversation took place in the weeks prior to the issue's publication, following a year of discussions with authors and the journal's editors. It seeks to highlight what we have learned in the process. Perhaps most importantly, the contributions we have received from across the world unequivocally demonstrate that the task of (self-) decolonization is more pertinent than ever and requires various breaks with academic convention: in terms of the role of the personal in scholarly writing, with regard to the use of innovative forms, genres, and media, and in other ways. As already mentioned, the conclusions that we make are only interim: the work that still needs to be done abounds, including within ourselves.

Dialogue One (16 March 2023)

Andrei: So much is currently being said about decolonization. The term is used—and, as we currently see in Eastern Europe—also abused a lot. But what does decolonization mean in practice? How does one engage in decolonizing oneself? In this special issue of *The February Journal*, I would like to focus on approaches to practical self-decolonization.

Shura: I agree. But when I think about this, I cannot help but wonder whether I have the right to engage in a self-decolonizing practice. Shouldn't I, a citizen of Russia and, in one way or another, a product of its imperialist culture, shut up and listen? Shouldn't I limit my own agency in this regard?

Andrei: Decolonizing the self is, in my opinion, one of those tasks that require our immediate and active attention. As somebody who was born and grew up in Belarus, I 'belong' to both the colonized and—in a way, especially if we consider Lukashenka's current politics—colonizing sides, I think we consciously have to challenge this 'belonging.' Ultimately, such work should result in redefining our own subjectivity and thus altering the way we perceive others. It is our primary task, I feel.

Shura: But how does one deconstruct one's 'belonging'? It is a very abstract term. Belonging to something often means substituting one's own experience with a 'collective,' 'universal' one. Unless you are a white heterosexual male, which is likely to make your personal experience close to the 'universal' one. But does it mean, then, that closely listening to myself might lead to a change in how I relate to others?

Andrei: If we consider belonging—but also theory, knowledge, and so on—to be a construct imposed by a historical white-male-heterosexual instance and by—more often than not—imperialist thinking, then it is exactly what colonizes, corrupts us, resulting in a colonizing gaze (as well as discourse and behavior) that we exercise upon others. By decolonizing the self—for instance, through dissecting our own experience—we question our belonging and other similar constructs, challenge and deconstruct them, and thus decolonize/deimperialize our relationship to others. That's how I see it at least.

Shura: Personal experience allows one to think *outside the box*, giving this idiomatic cliché a literal meaning. If 'culture,' 'knowledge,' et cetera are constructs, they confine us within boxed realities. Reflecting on your own experience makes you realize that this box has walls, but they are not as strong as it might seem and can in fact be brought down. Utilizing one's personal experience for this purpose might seem like a narcissistic trap, but I don't think it is. Rather, it is about the fact that any personal experience is always much more than 'universal,' 'universalized' experience. Here, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's figure of 'Anti-Narcissus' comes to mind. According to Viveiros de Castro, anti-narcissist thinking includes such features as *interspecific perspectivism* (the ability to see any thing or being as a subject) and *ontological multinaturalism* (an inversion of the Occidental multiculturalism), and not only presents an alternative to Western objectivist epistemology, but also can contribute to the 'decolonization of thought' ('Cannibal Metaphysics...'). I think autotheory (Fournier 2022; Vaneycken 2020; Wiegman 2020) is a great method to free the self from imposed colonizing constructs.

Andrei: How do you understand autotheory? For me, it is not simply about *reflecting* on your personal experience and sharing such reflections with others: this would make one part of the identity politics discourse. Moreover,

a person engaging in an autotheoretical practice of self-decolonization might, as our editor Isabel Bredenbröker points out, have to resist negative identity politics, that is, outside efforts to keep this person within the confines of one prescribed *identity*.

Shura: Definitely. You know, I love this phrase from Paul B. Preciado (2021), who writes in *Can the Monster Speak?* that '[t]o be branded with an identity means simply that one does not have the power to designate one's identity as universal.' Authotheory isn't about branding oneself with an identity, it is about deconstructing the 'universal,' of which Preciado speaks.

Andrei: So, it is about relating your personal experience to the one declared as 'universal,' not with the aim of making the former fit in, but rather loosening and shattering the very structure of the universal. Once these epistemological structures are in ruins, voices and experiences that did not fit in become much more audible. By decolonizing the self we are able to listen, hear, and perceive others and their unique experiences. I think my own practice of decolonizing the self started when I realized, some time ago, that I was queer. Luckily, this realization did not make me doubt my own sanity (which sadly happens to a lot of LGBTQIA+ people), but prompted closer attention to my personal experience. Analyzing it against the 'universal norm' into which I was supposed to fit, I grew more skeptical of 'the universal' rather than doubting my own experience. Which, in line with intersectional thinking, made me more attentive to other marginalized voices around me.

Shura: My practice has its roots in reading groups that I conducted with young adults at a Moscow museum between 2019 and 2022. We read texts on Stalinisim, genocide, World War II, and similar topics. I soon realized that my participants did not have the language to talk about traumatic past events. I understood this as a consequence of the (post-)Soviet education system, which had seen little transformation, if any. It made me reevaluate my own education and reexamine, among other things, historical science as a practice of colonization. I started listening to these young adults very carefully, and this act of listening made them try hard to formulate their own thoughts, rather than simply reproduce school-taught narratives.

Andrei: This reminds me of the opening to Maggie Nelson's (2015) *The Argonauts*. On the novel's very first page, she invokes Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained, albeit inexpressibly, within the expressed. By listening to what your students express you are able to get a sense of what they cannot express.

Shura: Listening is actually an essential practice for a teacher: it allows her to challenge constructions like 'knowledge' or 'belonging,' which, in turn, challenges and transforms the types of relationships with others that are imposed by these constructions.

Andrei: So, it would be interesting to learn how individuals engage in self-decolonizing autotheoretical practices and what manifestations these practices acquire in artistic, pedagogical, activist, academic, and other fields of life.

Shura: Yes! And not only discursive practices: we need to consider what is beyond discourse (even though Judith Butler would crucify us for suggesting there is anything non-discursive). Perhaps there are artistic, performative practices out there that work with affects, emotions, and bodies, aiming at self-decolonization. The question here is: What would this inquiry add to what we know about decolonization already?

Andrei: In her contribution to an edited volume on silence (reviewed in *The February Journal*'s Issue 01—02 (Veselov 2023)), Ana Fabíola Maurício (2023) critiques the discourse of postcolonialism and postcolonial theory for imposing onto an individual from an oppressed group a kind of responsibility to be that group's voice and representative. In other words, the individual's personal experience is seen as secondary to the collective experience of the group. I believe that engaging in autotheoretical self-decolonizing practices is a way to emphasize individual experiences and to challenge established theoretical approaches.

Shura: In our call for papers, we therefore invited authors who are developing autotheoretical self-decolonizing practices in their academic, artistic, activist, pedagogical, and other activities. We were particularly interested in submissions that use different genres and forms of presentation, as well as ones that stem from different geographical, epistemological, and other contexts.

Dialogue Two (30 March 2024)

Andrei: What have we learned while working on this issue of *The February Journal*?

Shura: Perhaps most importantly, it has shown us that dissecting one's personal experience is a vital form of academic knowledge creation. Analyzing one's background, values, positioning, and even more so, emotions as a scholar is at least as important as larger, more 'outward-looking' research.

Andrei: The axiom in academia is that the personal cannot be objective: where the scholar comes from should only be invoked to emphasize their subjective bias that might question or even discredit the knowledge they create. But it is obvious that this axiom is not enough for undoing the Western academic paradigm. What is needed is closer attention to the self, by means

of which structures of knowledge can be challenged and our relationships with others altered. Such a kind of self-decolonization requires a painful and hyper-honest process of digging within oneself, in a kind of archeology of the self which retrieves knowledge internalized over time.

Shura: Exactly. Decolonization cannot *not* begin with oneself. That is perhaps this issue's key finding. In a way, it is not even a finding: the practice of looking at oneself in an analytical and theoretical way had been exercised long before autotheory was invented. Franz Fanon (1952/1967), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, did it; Audre Lorde (1982), in her 'biomythography' *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, did it... But academia still resists acknowledging personalized writing because this might demand its (academia's) complete revision.

Andrei: It is worth noting here that within some disciplines, this process has been underway for some time. In anthropology, for instance. Implicated in the colonial-imperialist project, anthropology has been working to undo the damage it has done and to reinvent itself by 'troubling' that which for a long time was seen as axiomatic (see von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Margareta von Oswald's (2022) monograph is also reviewed in this issue by *The February Journal*'s editor **Isabel Bredenbröker**). Since the 1960s, this process has increasingly involved critical self-reflection on the part of anthropologists. In this issue, **Sofia González-Ayala** offers an interesting perspective along those lines by reflecting on the understanding of anthropology as a discipline within the Colombian academic community and on herself as a white-mestizo/mestizo anthropologist working in the museum sphere.

Shura: Such self-reflection is exercised first and foremost to contextualize—or 'trouble,' if you will—the material gathered in the field. And this is of course important, as our analyses always contain the personal. As for the personal information and reflection that are analyzed *as* part of the (ethnographic) material, it is still not very welcome in academic research and writing. Yet, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we can dissect our own experience in a much more rigorous and hands-on way than externally collected data, and autotheory allows us to treat the personal as a field of inquiry. What is needed is a certain ruthlessness with yourself, as **Nicola Kozicharow** keenly observes in her contribution to this issue.

Andrei: Another important thing that this issue demonstrates is that there is no well-defined boundary between the self and others. As Pasha Tretyakova, our junior editor, has observed, the differentiation between the two does not hold up, as even self-decolonization is relational and does not happen in isolation. I've also been astonished by the critical importance of innovative forms and genres for self-decolonizing work. To some extent, we understood this already when working on this issue's call for contributions: hence our decision to present it in the form of a dialogue between two editors, with

which we intended to make the call more personal. And yet, as several of our contributors emphasize, form is at least as important as content.

Shura: Right. The rigidity of form is inherent in conventional academic writing, but when we are questioning colonialism/imperialism and their legacies, formal rigidity does not work. Inherently intertwined with colonial pasts and postcolonial presents, it prevents us from exposing them. Breaking with formal conventions, as **Libby King** does in her brilliant autotheoretical essay on (post)coloniality in Australia, allows for uncovering these. It's as if she is using a specific form to express the inexpressible, to go back to that Wittgensteinian idea that you brought up in our previous conversation.

Andrei: Some authors have turned to media other than the written word for this purpose. **Melanie Garland** uses sound to contrast and intersect past-present histories of the European diaspora in the 'Global South.' Her contribution consists of a sonority piece and accompanying essay. Through voice, narrative, and sound archives, the sonority part seeks to challenge the linear narrative by playing with fragments of the past and present. Garland invites readers to engage in the practice of listening and thus partake in its 'subversive... pedagogical power,' to use Kozicharow's words**.** In turn, **Anatoli Vlassov** strives to decolonize his own body through choreographic practice—and goes as far as to invent a performative technique called *Phonesia*. This technique, as Vlassov writes in his article, allows him 'to rebalance the dynamic between body and language, embodying resistance against language oppression through the medium of dance.' These are two examples of how self-decolonization can benefit from media going beyond discourse.

Shura: This issue also underlines that it is not only personalized writing and innovative genres, but also Indigenous insights that are important for self-decolonization. They undermine the homogeneity and restrict the uniformity of Western academia. **Keren Poliah and her co-authors** uncover the fragmented identity of members of minoritized ethnic groups in the academic context of the United Kingdom. Based on testimonials of international postgraduate doctoral researchers at a British university, the essay presents three experiences of self-decolonization, placing Indigenous ways of conveying communities' truths and painful pasts at its center. In Poliah's words, decolonization is 'as an act of love and care for others.' Care is also important for the approach of González-Ayala, who analyzes the representation of Colombia's Indigenous peoples (Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero communities) in the temporary exhibitions' hall of the National Museum in Bogotá.

Andrei: Indigenous knowledges and heritage are at the core of **Sela Kodjo Adjei**'s article dedicated to the Ghanaian spoken-word poet and musician Yom Nfojoh's record *Alter Native*. Adjei analyzes Nfojoh's complex system

of poetic and musical references, both traditional and contemporary. In combination with the vulnerability that Nfojoh exercises, these aspects render his musical practice a self-decolonizing practice.

Shura: I find it important that Adjei demonstrates how Nfojoh's practice intertwines with and impacts his own artistic search and self-decolonizing efforts. Adjei also speaks of decolonial healing, which resonates with Poliah's and González-Ayala's arguments.

Andrei: This issue also contains some remarkable reflections on scholars' positioning within Slavic/area studies in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. **Sofia Gavrilova**'s essay is a strikingly honest analysis of the author's own imperialism. As a researcher of Russian origin working in 'Western' academia while researching Russian issues, Gavrilova is describing her painstaking efforts at reassembling her identity as a scholar after the war began. A central question of the essay is that of voice as opposed to silence. Should Russians (both Russian citizens and ethnic Russians) speak, she asks based on her research in Georgia—and ponders a possible answer. One of the essay's peer-reviewers concluded their commentary as follows (cited here with permission of both the reviewer and Gavrilova): 'I would like to express my gratitude to the author for her honest and really timely text, which I am sure will resonate with many colleagues.' As somebody who has worked on Russia a lot, I concur very much.

Shura: So do I. In a similar vein, Nicola Kozicharow highlights how easy it is to go with the flow in academia and how events like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine can dramatically change that. Kozicharow reflects on 'Russian art history,' which tends to present a direct homogeneous narrative concealing violence, appropriation, and exploitation of Indigenous arts in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Kozicharow also challenges the term 'Russian art,' which has been used as a universal in Soviet and post-Soviet art history. When I was a student, I attended various courses on art history—and the term 'Russian art' was never questioned by my professors. It is only much later, reflecting on my education, that I was able to deconstruct this term and realize how it works. As a term, 'Russian art' is part of the colonial ideology's 'great heritage' that those in power strive to preserve and protect, so it is simply impossible to apply different critical approaches to it.

Andrei: I am also impressed by the decisiveness with which Kozicharow undoes herself, her identities, her family history, and her academic path. She talks about experiencing 'epistemic doubt,' which, accompanied with and even facilitated by displacement and illness, turns into a deeply emotional and embodied practice of self-decolonization.

Shura: While working on this issue, I understood, among other things, that the post-Soviet is an inherent part of my education and experience as a

researcher. And I now see that, despite having spent a lot of time and energy to acknowledge, understand, and analyze this, there is still a long way to go. But at least I have identified a starting point for autotheorizing, which helps me to reflect on my own research practice and academic background.

Andrei: As for me, I have continued to reflect on the Belarusian part of my identity and its relationship to Russia, a process that started during the 2020 protests in Belarus and intensified with Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although I had always perceived identity in a multiperspectival non-essentialist way, I realized that I had neglected my Belarusianness, and that, at least to some extent, this had happened because of the knowledge structures in which I had existed. Yes, my identity, as that of anybody else, has been plural and complex, but relying too much on the idea of cosmopolitanism led to my sidelining parts of it, even if this was an unconscious process. Now I understand that external factors, as well as internal ones, account for what happened. This reflective process has started within me, and I will see what it brings about.

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Acknowledgements

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Suppose We See Ourselves

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Suppose We See Ourselves

Libby King

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this essay contains references to deceased persons.

Narrative form is often taken for granted, a set of storytelling rules that go unnoticed and unseen; similarly, colonialism benefits from an internal invisibility that resists observation. This autotheory essay considers the interplay between colonialism and invisibility, and explores how narrative form can act as a cultural intervention. The essay suggests that autoforms— such as autotheory, fictocriticism, autofiction, and autoethnography— expose invisible cultural rules and intrinsically alter the way content is understood. It is especially concerned with how colonialism uses authorship to limit internal observation and critique and suggests that by refiguring the 'I' and the 'we,' autoforms expose these invisible internal rules. It argues that autoforms actively reconfigure the boundaries around many of the early twenty-first century's major cultural conversations about representation and appropriation, lived experience and expertise, and public space and private space, as well as notions of identity, othering, consciousness, and embodiment. The paper approaches form not just as narrative structure, but also as a tool, a technique, a strategy, and an intervention that inherently impacts content and changes how the cultural landscape is seen and navigated. Through comparing the yellow soils of southern Australia and Gaza, the grammar of Derrida and Wittgenstein, and the path of water and rivers, the essay explores how the form we use to tell stories is often as important as the content.

To Be Seen I

1.   Suppose: we see ourselves. Though unusual in white, colonial culture, there have been instances.
2.   To see oneself in whitefella culture is to navel-gaze; it's narcissistic, it's unsightly. Better, instead, to be an academic, to speak as an all-knowing God: this makes sense; this is acceptable.

Form and Imperialism

3.   Amitav Ghosh (2016) says that the way we tell stories is as imperial as any other colonial technology. Look at 'the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth,' he says in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh 2016: 7).
4.   Perhaps the proliferation of 'I' and 'we' in literary forms is able to do something, not through content, but through form.
5.   We are told it's narcissistic to even acknowledge the self, when the opposite is true; to ignore the self is to position the narrator as omnipotent, a favorite disguise of oppression.
6.   Colonial culture is comfortable with forms of speech, writing, and knowing that reinforce colonial norms: 'Politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship, social theory, and history writing,' Edward Said says in *Orientalism* (Said 1979/1994: 13).

To See I

7.   Over dinner, a friend asked me what I was writing about, and I told her this and that—climate change, consciousness, colonialism. But when I said colonialism, she put down her fork and looked at me, confused: 'So your narrator isn't white?'
8.   She said this as though colonialism was a topic for the colonized and never colonizers. As though the subject of othering is intrinsically a subject for 'The Othered' alone (Said 1994: 1).
9.   We don't know we wear blinkers; we don't even know the shape of our own world.
10.   As a white child growing up in white culture, I learned the boundaries of my whiteness according to the declarations of my Narungga Godmother, Aunty Raylene, who didn't hide her expertise on the unbearable strangeness of white culture. 'Shame,' she muttered when we were unthoughtfully outspoken. 'You whitefellas!' she declared when we'd forgotten to be properly thankful or reciprocate a kindness appropriately.

Mixing I

11.   Aunty Raylene was famous for her bread-and-butter pudding.

12.   This many eggs, that much milk, and this much sugar. Mix it like this. White bread, buttered, cut into rectangles, placed in this pattern in the baking dish. Scatter sultanas (blowflies) on top and bake.

The Long Paddock

13.   Imagine: a long, straight road of yellow earth. On either side there are two or three meters of low scrub that sometimes, after the rains, turn a little green. Framing the road are low wire fences topped by two straight rows of barbed wire.

14.   For hours, when I was a child, we would drive down the center of roads like this in a small car, following the faint parallel tracks left by cars that had gone before. Occasionally, when a car came in the other direction, both vehicles veered to the left and the drivers acknowledged each other according to their personal custom: an index finger was the most common; some chose the index and middle finger together (my dad's preference); while newbies or enthusiasts raised a whole hand. After the cloud of yellow dust that stretched behind the vehicle had passed, each car returned to the center tracks.

15.   On the other side of the fence the vegetation was sparser and dryer. Sheep huddled under the odd small tree. Sometimes a sheep would get stuck in the fence, and then the car would stop, and someone would get out and pull the wires apart to free the sheep and it would run off, petrified and alone, looking for its flock.

16.   'Form,' Caroline Levine (2015) says in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 'always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*' (p. 3, original emphasis). John Frow, (2015) in *Genre*, adds that 'genres actively generate and shape the knowledge of the world' (p. 2).

17.   In droughts, farmers bring their sheep to graze along the roadside. This is the long paddock, the shape of a flock of sheep in a southern Australian drought.

Writing and Form I

18.   'It's a poem,' a friend told me about an essay I wrote.

19.   I didn't understand what she meant because there were no rhymes and no line breaks, it was four thousand words, and there was a beginning and an end.

20.   But then I read Jan Zwicky's (2023) theory of lyric thought in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Lyric thought, Zwicky says, is 'thought whose

structure is resonant, in which each aspect is tuned by the whole' (p. 117). I understood this to mean that meaning was conveyed not through declaring a thesis but through pointing, shaping, forming.

The Strip

21.   The earth of the Gaza Strip is the same color as the roads of the long paddock—a soft, pastel yellow—and, when I went there for lunch in 1984, the buildings were the same color.

22.   The color of the earth was familiar to my eight-year-old eyes, but the low buildings made of stone were not. It was a monochrome landscape of soft yellow.

23.   My dad drove us in a hired car from Nablus in the West Bank to Gaza to visit one of my mother's nursing students. The license plate indicated the car was hired in Israel, which was helpful at the checkpoints.

24.   My mother's colleague welcomed us to her home. She brushed aside colorful sheets that hung between the spaces inside. 'A family of sixteen live in this hallway and a family of ten live in that room,' she said. In each there was a neat pile of mattresses stacked by a wall. In the room where we ate, an older woman sat on the floor and laughed as she demonstrated how she had made fresh couscous by rubbing flour with a little water between her hands. The couscous was steamed in a pot on top of tomatoes and chickpeas and chicken and then inverted onto a large serving platter. There were few people around when we arrived, but a crowd appeared for the meal. We sat in a circle on the floor with the platter in the center and ate with our right hands. Like most meals of that time, my siblings and I chewed in stunned silence because, you see, we'd never eaten food with flavor before.

25.   In the car on the way home, my parents discussed the generosity of sharing such a meal with us, while we children sat in the backseat and looked out the windows.

Writing and Form II (Borders of Form and Genre)

26.   In the room that is all my own, I read Joshua Whitehead's (2023) book *IndigiQueerness: A Conversation About Storytelling*. He says that First Nations' consciousness 'is historically grounded, giving recognition and value to a form of society and collective identity that predates the nation-state' (Whitehead and Abdou 2023: 15). He says, 'I see everyone defying the expectations of border, whether it's border of province or territory or nation, but also the borders of genre or the borders of form' (Whitehead and Abdou 2023: 90).

27.   Breaking the rules of form and genre might be popular in the early

twenty-first century, but its origins are not new.

To Be Seen II

28. Not long ago, I found an enormous, bright green grub in the garden. It seemed useless and defenseless, so I picked it up. Because I am a human of these times, I pulled my phone from the pocket of my jeans and directed the camera at its head. Perhaps, I thought, I would post a photo of it on Instagram. I might, I thought, ask if anyone knew what it was.
29. But every time I tried to focus on the bug's head, it squirmed and twisted its head away.
30. I placed it back into the garden and wondered what it meant to the bug to be seen. I wondered if it was shy, then I wondered if it was annoyed. In the end, the only thing I felt sure of was that the bug knew it was being watched and resisted it.

Writing and Form III (Form in Literature)

31. Form, perhaps, reconfigures ways of thinking—and form can, perhaps, reconfigure ways of being. 'It is the work of form to make order,' Levine says. 'And this means that forms are the stuff of politics.' The stakes, she says, 'are high' (Levine 2015: 3).

To Be Seen III

32. White culture hates to be seen.
33. When I told the story of how white men stole my Aunty Mandy, my mother's sister—a Peramangk woman, taken from her mother and placed with my grandmother's family, and who is part of Australia's Stolen Generation (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997)—a colleague, also a white woman, said, 'I wonder, does the narrator know yet that all cultures are flawed?'
34. I'm interested in the blinkers she wears, and I wanted to say, 'Actually, white colonial culture has its own philosophies and norms and forms.' But instead, I scribbled #notallcultures in my notebook.

Writing and Form IV (Mixing Forms and Genres)

35. Yesterday: a friend and I stood on a bridge in the forest and looked at the water below. We had been talking about how to know if something is the right thing to do. 'I don't know where I heard it,' she said. 'Maybe I read it, but water knows where to go. Each water drop knows where it needs to

go.

36. We stood and watched as the water passed below us. At one point she put her arm around me and I leant into her.

37. 'I will not mix genres,' Derrida (1980) wrote in 'The Law of Genre.' 'I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them' (p. 55).

38. I like the way he speaks about the mobility of these terms. Upon first reading, I wondered if he really wanted to be quoted for all time as saying 'genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.' Of course, no matter how big or far reaching these words become, they will not overpower his broader legacy. Still, that was my first thought.

39. It seemed he didn't care whether these sentiments were attributed to him, though. He seemed to care only about their trajectory, their mobility, like a scientist who casts dye into rivers to see water flows and make hydrological maps.

40. Right there at the top of this article called 'The Law of Genre,' which is a pretty mighty name, he casts those words—'Genres are not to be mixed'—out into the world, marked like dye with his name all over them, to see the path they take, where they end up.

41. 'Suppose: I abandon them to their fate, I set free their random virtualities and turn them over to my audience—or, rather, to *your* audience, to your auditory grasp, to whatever mobility they retain and you bestow upon them to engender effects of all kinds without my having to stand behind them,' he says (Derrida 1980: 55, original emphasis).

The Continents

42. Me: I will not mix continents. I won't talk of the water on this one and the water on that one; of the water appearing on this one and disappearing on that one and of all the little creatures that appear and disappear with the water appearing and disappearing. That is for science, for stories, for poems.

Writing and Form V (Grammar as Form)

43. I like the way Derrida starts his paragraph with a word and a colon.

44. So many commas,

45. so many semi-colons;

46. so many exclamation marks!

47. I like the way Ludwig Wittgenstein uses exclamation marks! And how Maggie Nelson copied him and how Wayne Koestenbaum copied Nelson—or, perhaps, how Nelson copied Koestenbaum!

48. I like the way Derrida says the words and then explains how he is using the words to see how his audience—no! how his audience's audience—uses them. What they become, where they flow.

49. Form is, he says, 'yet scarcely determined' (Derrida 1980: 55).

50. I'm interested in Derrida's use of the word 'form' here because I am trying to understand the difference between form and genre in literature. There are 'several interpretative options,' Derrida says (1980: 55). The options are, in fact, 'legion' (p. 55).

51. Rivers, too, are 'yet scarcely determined.' Only when we account for things such as topography and surface (granite versus sand, for example) do the options narrow, and things like springs and wetlands appear.

To See II (Form and Seeing)

52. Having cast the dye, Derrida (1980) goes on to provide some topography and surface features: 'you may be tempted by... two modes of interpretation, or, if you prefer to give these words more of a chance, then you may be tempted by two different genres of hypothesis' (p. 55).

53. This phrase—'genre of hypothesis'—is interesting to me because, as I have said, I'm interested in the difference between form and genre as it relates to literature, but also all narratives, and perhaps even all writings.

54. My hypothesis is that if colonialism is the overarching theme of our times, then new forms, new genres—mixing genres!—hijack and subvert its agenda, covertly telling the story of people and waters and foods and landscapes excluded from colonial narrative forms.

Mixing II (Bread-and-Butter Pudding)

55. Start with white bread. Generously spread margarine on one side, then slice into rectangles.

56. For the custard, use five eggs, this much milk, that much sugar, and whisk vigorously with a fork.

57. Outside Aunty Raylene's kitchen there is a garden with an old lemon tree growing beside a corrugated iron water tank. Beyond the garden and beyond the shoreline is the Spencer Gulf where the giant squid live.

58. Aunty Raylene arranges the bread artfully in a greased casserole dish, dots it with sultanas and margarine, then pours the custard mixture over the top. Before baking, she dusts it with cinnamon.

59. I have a friend who always suggests adding jam, but I always respond: 'No, we don't do that.'

Writing and Form VI (Limits)

60. Derrida goes on to say that the word genre evokes 'do' or 'do not,' a binary opposition that powerfully evokes limits and boundaries. Yet he also emphasizes connection. Genre in nature, he says, is inseparable from

genre in culture: 'the two genres of genre which, neither separable nor inseparable, form an odd couple of one without the other' (Derrida 1980: 55). As inseparable, he says, as 'I' and 'we' (p. 56—7).

61. Autotheory is described by Lauren Founier (2021) in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* as 'a self-conscious way of engaging with theory' (p. 7), while in 'Queering the Essay,' David Lazar (2013: 15) argues that experimenting with genre is indelibly linked with gender as an embodiment practice. In *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020) mixes theory and memoir, embedding his personal history into his scholarship: 'I track that un-Canadian and otherworldly activity, that desire to love at all costs, by way of the theoretical site that is my personal history and the world as it presents itself to me with bloodied hands' (p. 9).

62. Bending and blurring forms invert the rules of colonial storytelling technologies, becoming an experimental site where the limits of scholarship, research, criticism, and narratology are reconfigured. Mixed genres, such as autotheory, fictocritcism, and autofiction, move and reconsider binaries and limits, elevating emerging ways of looking at twenty-first-century conversations.

63. There is no space for appropriation and deception here; no space for writers like Joseph Boyden to appropriate Indigeneity while telling mythological stories of European colonizers as though they were the stories of the colonized (Barrera 2016). When identity disclosure is embedded, the 'I' is not given places to hide.

64. Mixed forms excavate in-between spaces, creating new rules for conversations and structurally embedding new norms. When scholars disclose who they are and share the story of how they came to their subject (Muecke 2002: 108), their status as omniscient collapses and the elevation of institutional expertise over lived experience is intrinsically challenged, not just through content, but also, structurally, through form. These new genres elevate expertise acquired through lived experience, further embedding representation instead of appropriation or institutional expertise.

65. Even the notions of public and private change. In the autofiction novels of Karl Ove Knausgård and Shelia Heti, as well as the autotheory of Chris Kraus, the private becomes almost unbearably public, in an uncomfortable reshaping of the neoliberal town square.

66. I once spent a summer reading Belcourt, Kraus, Knausgård, and Heti. In autofiction and autotheory, the tension between the author and the narrator, between individual truth and collective truth, come to the front. These autoforms that elevate the 'I' are controversial. In colonial culture, the 'I' is understood as narcissistic; autoforms elevate the author over the content have a tendency to get lost in raggedy details that seem unliterary or inappropriate contributions to the neoliberal townhall, and often spiral from a stream of consciousness into critical theory. In *Bending Genre*, Margot Singer and Nicole Walker (2013) explain that one of the more challenging ideas for some is understanding that these discomforts and disruptions are often the point (p. 5).

68. My point, I guess, is that form is doing some heavy lifting in early twenty-first-century cultural conversations and the popularity of these new forms may be because of their ability to reframe the rules of critical cultural conversations.

Real Life as Form

69. In whitefella cultures, colonial cultures like Australia, the false is the real and the real is false. In the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, a common concern was that blackfellas got 'too much,' even though in truth the wealth, natural resources, and, yes, even the children of Aboriginal people had been plundered, and even though the referendum did not include reparations for that transfer of wealth (Williams 2023, Withers 2023). Any discussion of what has been taken from Aboriginal Australians is automatically returned by white Australia with unprompted defensiveness and resentment, as though the transaction was the opposite to the truth; a myth constructed to falsify reality.

70. But white culture doesn't know it. We pretend to know, but we don't know. And we have strategies and tactics and literary forms to make us believe that up is down and down is up (King 2022).

71. Understanding white culture starts with understanding that it is something that can be observed, dissected, and seen; that it can be studied as any other system or collection of norms.

72. The unconscious belief that colonial culture isn't up for discussion is there in comments like 'Your narrator isn't white' when I say my story is about colonialism and 'all cultures are flawed' when discussing stealing Aboriginal infants.

Writing and Form VII (Autoforms)

73. Autoforms, such as autofiction, fictocriticism and autotheory, are relentless: look inside, look at the self.

74. This is a revolutionary intervention in a world where colonialism demands invisibility and resists being seen, analyzed, understood.

75. In these forms, the unexamined assumptions of dominant cultural constructs are not hidden, but put uncomfortably on display. This creates confusion and discomfort, and opens in-between spaces that allows an active redefining of the boundaries around issues like representation and appropriation, lived experience and expertise, public space and private space, as well as notions of identity, othering, consciousness, and embodiment.

76. Form and genre are not just structures, but tools and techniques, strategies and interventions, that change the way we see and understand.

In the End

77.   Suppose: I was I.
78.   Suppose: We were We.[1]

1. This piece is about the differences between form and content. The form of this essay has a number of influences: the numbered passages are influenced by Berlant and Stewart (2019), Ghosh (2016), Nelson (2009), and Wittgenstein (1922); the invitations to 'suppose' and 'imagine' are influenced by Derrida (1980) and Nelson (2009).

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Author's bio

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Attempting to Decolonize Oneself: Sonorities between the 'West' and the 'South'

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Attempting to Decolonize Oneself: Sonorities between the 'West' and the 'South'

Melanie Garland

The two parts of this contribution—poetic sonority and essay—are poetic and theoretical experiments in response to the challenge of decolonizing the self. In particular, I am interested in contrasting and intersecting past-present histories of the European diaspora in the global 'South,' drawing on my own family history marked by *mestizaje* and hybridity. Through voice narrative and sound archives, this sound piece challenges linear narrative by playing with the idea of fragments. In it, traces of oceans and seas overlap, reflecting through sound and theory the histories of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Mediterranean and North Seas, as containers and corridors of entangled past-present colonial histories. The piece opens new ground for interpreting hybrid cultures, a possible starting point for decolonizing oneself when standing between the so-called Global 'West' and 'South.'

PLEASE LISTEN FIRST
(At the end of this essay, a transcription of the sound piece can be found.)

1. Sonic Archives

Sound and listening have enjoyed in recent decades a significantly growing interest in many disciplines outside the arts, music, and performance fields. Social scientists, anthropologists working with sound, science and technology scholars, and literary and cultural researchers, among others, have become interested in sound and listening as an enriching avenue of research within the academy. For instance, one of the pioneers of the anthropology of sound, Steven Feld (2004), has taken sound into ethnography. Through sound, listening, recording, and post-production, specific lived experience acquires a very distinct tangibility (Feld 2004). Sound, with its potential for acoustic-spatial imagination and situational experience, delivers a unique quality of environment awareness, which, through composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros's (2005) method of 'deep listening,' makes it possible to experience 'sound-temporal spaces' (Ndikung 2020). These 'spaces' differ from visual

forms as captured in images. Oliveros (1999) formulates the method as

> 'Deep Listening involves going below the surface of what is heard, expanding to the whole field of sound while finding focus. This is the way to connect with the acoustic environment, all that inhabits it, and all that there is' (p. 5).

Sound, for its part, allows listeners to understand, feel, and sense our surroundings with an auditory consciousness as a means to not only document and shape reality, but also to amplify it. Sound and the technological power of recording allow us to register and amplify sonorous experiences that we cannot hear simply through our ears and that would have gone unnoticed by our hearing.

From a decolonial perspective, as the art theorist and curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung described in a 2021 seminar entitled 'Space-Time Continuum of Sonority: Deep Listening Sessions,' listening becomes a political act of sound and voice amplification, a strategy to combat the omnipresence of the image, especially nowadays, when the hyper speed of social media is dominated by the visual. Sound and deep listening turn into instruments that allow one to hear the 'marginalized' that usually go unheard, becoming a political practice of listening through situated knowledge. Here, this practice opens reflections on how we listen today and whether it is possible to decolonize our listening and thus overcome the hegemonic power structures dictating the way we listen (Garland 2023).

This seminar was the starting point for my interest in experimenting with art and ethnographic research methods that involve sound and listening. For my current PhD research, which investigates stories of places and people in a migratory setting of permanent precariousness and vulnerability due to border regimes, the question of how to represent 'the other' has been vital. I did not want to reproduce visualizations of the 'migrant body,' especially since my work is situated within the discipline of anthropology. The mainstream narrative of contemporary migration based on the vulnerability and victimization of the 'migrant body' via television and social media through video and photography has been an essential reason for my search for other methods and ways of engaging with migratory experiences. Thus, I began to experiment with sound, from collecting ambient sounds, creating sound archives, recording sound walks, and curating collaborative listening sessions as part of my fieldwork, thus going beyond the classic ethnographic methods.

For this contribution, I delved into the sonic archives I recorded and collected during my PhD fieldwork, where I examined three self-made settlements of people-in-transit in Europe and South America, specifically in Italy, France, and Chile. The places—The Dzjangal,[1] Tiburtina,[2] and Los Arenales[3]—were established by people-in-transit and remained self-organized with no governmental involvement. The collected sounds guided me to investigate how these settlements—so-called non-places—changed

and evolved into social places, and how the concepts of liminality (Turner 1960) and in-betweenness might play a role in their transformation. I recorded various ambient sounds related to the history of each place. Inspired by field-recording artists[4] and ocean-sound artists such as Nick Kuepfer[5] and Jana Winderen,[6] who pay close attention to maritime sound environments and small underwater animals, during my fieldwork travels between 2021 and 2022, I recorded ambient and underwater soundscapes of the Mediterranean Sea, the English Channel (an arm connecting the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea), and the Pacific Ocean.

I was interested in archiving these tones not only for their poetic and material quality of the ocean and sea sound, but also for the symbolism that this saltwater represents to the people of these settlements. For example, the Mediterranean and the English Channel often represent ongoing and recurring tragedies and dangerous journeys in the migratory narratives of the camp inhabitants in Italy and France, mainly from the African diaspora. Likewise, past colonial trade voyages in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans are present, albeit deep down, in the narratives of Afro-Caribbean communities who want to reach northern Chile to set up informal settlements in empty areas of the Atacama Desert.

Here, I was inspired by the 2023 exhibition *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, which sought to rethink the Indian Ocean, integrating it into African histories of forced and unforced displacement that produced maritime relations charged by mercantile imperialism. The artists in this exhibition showed other perspectives on the African and Asian continents, highlighting these continents' historical, cultural, and linguistic connections. Rather than framing the Indian Ocean as a divider with layers of colonial histories and legacies, they offered multiple perspectives on cultural flows resonating today. *Indigo Waves and Other Stories* emphasized the 'perpetual hybridity' found in the Indian Ocean, moving away from a re-centering of colonial legacy and power imbalance marked by the ocean (Ginwala, Ndikung and Corsaro 2023).

In turn, I have found colonial sonic archives that allude to layers of the tangled histories of The Dzjangal, Tiburtina, and Los Arenales, which, digging deeper, reveal the legacy of colonial navigating between Europe and Latin America. Looking particularly at residents' narratives of these places, I was able to understand their relationships to the colonial past. This past includes not only colonialism in Africa and Central-South Asia—specifically the British Empire in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia and the Italian empire in Somalia and Eritrea, countries from which Dzjangal and Tiburtina residents hailed—but also colonial trade in the Atlantic, the Haitian revolution, and its legacy in the Caribbean, essential to understanding the current migration to Chile. Los Arenales's residents are mainly Afro-Caribbean communities originating from Colombia, Venezuela, Haiti, Bolivia, and Peru. Los Arenales is a physical place where different layers of histories are entangled that, at first glance, are invisible in today's reality, but which come to the surface through the violent racist acts that

are taking place in Chile against Afro-Caribbean communities.

For the sound part of this contribution, I was mainly interested in using found tracks from the Huntley Film Archives and Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico, namely, fragments of the film *Italia Vittoriosa* (1936), which depicts the Italian migration to South America and its subsequent transmission of the colonial idea of a 'glorious Italian past' to the South American territory, and of the film *Colonial Africa* (1940), featuring the paternalistic propaganda of British colonialism. In deciding to experiment with colonial archives sonically, I kept in mind the poetic idea of the ocean and sea as a guiding thread and a catalyzing track as well as a compositional and theoretical container for colonial and contemporary stories of journeys through the Mediterranean and the English Channel towards the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

I am inspired by Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt's (2013) notion of 'track.' In his essay 'Track Studies: Popular Music and Postcolonial Analysis,' Ismaiel-Wendt analyzes the idea of overlapping and looping in popular music as a counter-response to traditional linear-chronological narrative structures. My overlapping of tracks becomes a decolonial response to this linear way of storytelling, where mixing colonial sound archives (past) and sounds of the oceans and seas (present) allows for breaking with the linearity of storytelling. In Ismaiel-Wendt's (2013) words, 'The track does not imagine a fixed entity, it does not know a single order of events—and thereby lacks a hierarchy between melody, sound, and rhythm—and it is polymorphous and free from the sole task of representation' (p. 98).

I use the idea of 'catalyzing track' to refer to oceans' and seas' movements: not only to the flux of colonial trade and contemporary migration, but also to their power to connect and intertwine flows. In my sound piece, marine sound, ambient and underwater, conveys this poetic idea of navigating between the 'West' and the 'South' (see below), allowing me to reinterpret the colonial sonic archives. I am interested in bringing these two colonial soundtracks into an experimental and poetic context that differs from other sonic modalities dominated by a single narrative and colonial legacy, thus highlighting the idea that 'sound cannot be sounding without the use of power' (Ong 1999: 65). I consciously attune listeners to the sounds that occurred in a particular space-time, besides being careful not to reproduce a sense of violence and dominance when editing these sonic materials.

2. Hybridity

The amplified sounds of oceans and seas recorded in my past PhD fieldwork have been my primary source for reflecting on 'decolonizing the self.' I perceive the in-between space of the oceans and seas as a navigator between cultural identities and borderlands. I have reflected on in-betweenness not only as a state of transit that migrants experience when

moving from one place to another—something I have been researching in my current PhD project—but also in the territorial sense of being between geographical borders. The spaces between the Global 'West' and 'South' in particular, which I entangle with the perspective of 'the West and the Rest' (Hall 1992/2018), has played an important part in the postcolonial reflections of the last decade. In his essay by that name, Stuart Hall (2018), a Marxist sociologist and cultural theorist, analyzes how the notion of 'modernity' reached by 'advanced, developed and industrial' societies has come to represent the conception of Western societies. The 'West' is no longer just a geographical term but becomes a discursive and power binary, between so-called developed societies (Western societies) and undeveloped societies (non-Western societies).

When I started working on this contribution, it did not explicitly address the idea of what is 'West' and what is 'South.' Instead, I was interested in the liminal state between them, somehow blurring the lines between one and the other. Isabel Bredenbröker, an editor at *The February Journal*, motivated me to look further into these assumed polarities, questioning whether such a clear division really exists today. The idea of standing in between the 'West' and 'South' resonated with my own life experience of being born in Chile and having European ancestors: South America has a distinct history of forced *mestizisation*[7] that connects it to multiple cultural histories up to this day.

I was especially interested in the history of my own family, which is Chilean with a European background—Italian immigrants from the 1940s on my mother's side, and on my father's, British and Irish predecessors who moved to the Chilean desert to produce and extract the mineral saltpeter. My great-great-grandfather was part of the so-called glorious era of saltpeter, which today is widely criticized as a tragic history of the extractive exploitation of Chilean natural resources and the appropriation of Altiplano indigenous communities' land. Unlike my father's obsession with the family's genealogy, which he and my grandfather traced all the way back until 1680, my interest went beyond collecting our family archive, which I will not detail in this essay.

I want to note my interest in my father and grandfather's fascination with knowing our origins—not only with looking at our family history, but also with the idea of 'coming from Europe,' which still resonates with many South American families today. The European part of my family (and that of many Chilean families) that migrated to South American territory has significantly influenced my artistic and later anthropological journey and served as a starting point for my interests in 'colonial legacies.' Since I was a child, I heard from my relatives that we should be proud to be of European descent, especially because we should be grateful for inheriting a European passport, something that I took very seriously when migrating to Europe. The German and Italian states saw me as a citizen of the European Union for having an Italian passport, and not a 'Sudaca,' as many still derogatorily call people coming from South America.

By this, I do not mean to devalue my family history, much less to simplify or reduce the great suffering and agony that my great-grandfather experienced when he emigrated from the Italian port of Genova to the South American port of Valparaiso during the Second World War to escape from poverty and persecution by the Italian government. Rather, I am critical of the idea of 'coming from Europe' as something that elevates a heritage alien to our reality as South Americans, as it is entangled with the colonial legacy of seeing value as coming from the European continent. Knowing that 'we came from Europe' provoked me to start reflecting on this supposed polarity, the difference between 'Europe' and 'Latin America,' or, as we were erroneously taught in elementary school, the duality between the 'first' and the 'third' worlds.

My personal feeling of being in-between has been a significant reference point in my interest in hybrid cultures and hybridity. The concept of hybridity, which resonates strongly with my own family history and that of many South Americans, is one of the broad terms employed and disputed in postcolonial theory. The term was coined by Homi Bhabha (1994), a scholar of contemporary postcolonial studies, who argues that all cultural statements and structures are based and articulated in a 'third space of enunciation' (p. 37). 'Hybridity' commonly refers to the emergence of new transcultural forms in zones that had contact with colonization and thus formed 'third spaces' that are hybrids of two or more cultures. Bhabha recognizes the eventual contradictions of the 'third space' for cultural identity, but, according to him, it can contribute to transcending the exoticism of 'multiculturalism' and 'cultural diversity' so criticized within the postcolonial discourse for neglecting the colonial power and legacy that a 'multicultural' society represents. Instead, the 'inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity' (Bhabha 1994: 38) can open a way for conceptualizing an international culture that is not based on exoticizing other cultures (Mambrol 2016).

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), an American scholar of Chicana feminism, cultural theory, and queer theory, adds another perspective to this hybridity critique. Drawing from her own life of being born and raised on the Texas-Mexico border, including personal experiences of cultural marginalization, Anzaldúa's (1987) theories intertwine social marginalization with the processes of hybridity, in-betweenness, and mixed-race status (Keating 2006), entangling academic and poetic writing. Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of the notion of 'border thinking,' of being between two realities, which can also produce spaces of possibility for new understandings. She claims:

> 'Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others who have or live in more than one culture, we receive multiple, often opposing, messages. The union of two self-consistent but usually incomparable frames of reference causes a clash, a cultural collision' (Anzaldúa 1987: 85).

The concept of borderland provides a new way of understanding the polarization between borders. Borders do not just create two sides; the borderland is an in-between with its own spatiality and sensoriality, a place of collective negotiation and encounter for marginal subjectivities that can articulate hybridity as a political and intellectual position.

The concepts of hybridity and the borderland as Bhabha and Anzaldúa put forward play an important role in understanding my own positionality between the supposed polarities of 'Western' heritage and my present 'South.' Looking at my own identity allows me to grasp hybridity as much more complex than a simple location 'in between' two poles, challenging me to find some initial hints to the answer of how one can decolonize oneself. Being between cultures, territories, and identities opens the potential for an alternative interpretation of this dominant duality delivered since the colonial past. Placing my own family genealogy in the borderland represents a way to initiate a process of self-decolonization in the face of a colonial legacy.

The sound piece I produced for this contribution is also premised on the ideas of hybridity and borderland; it consists of different overlapping tracks that are fragments of sound archives encountered from a colonial past, and sound archives of oceans and seas recorded in the present. Here I played with Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt's idea of the track as a way of decolonial listening by changing the context from which these colonial archives originate and their propagandistic idea of 'coming from Europe.' I opted to overlay the sound fragments of colonial propaganda with sounds of the oceans and seas, and with my own narrative voice. The overlapping of different tracks thus relates a multiplicity of stories between languages and rhythm, its sonic superimpositions pushing back against the linear, colonial perspective of a single history or 'track' (Garland 2022).

In addition, guided by Oliveros's (2005) method of deep listening, I approached the colonial archival tracks with the intention of attuning myself to sensory experiences, especially as I listened to the Spanish-language track that prominently communicates the idea of 'coming from Europe' and 'the glorious Italy' as a dominant culture in South America. I noticed the sonic textures of the recordings from the Huntley Film and Movimento Operaio e Democratico archives: they are digital recordings of speakers playing analog recordings of the material, producing a multi-recording (reproductions of reproductions). Instead of synthesizing the sounds, the different sound layers added more textures, creating what I would describe as 'noise' in terms of technical quality. 'Noise' I do not interpret in this context as a polluted and disturbing sound; instead, I refer here to a sound of low intensity, uniform and continuous.

In my piece, I brought these recordings together with the ambient and underwater sounds of the oceans and seas, which I recorded with one to four omnidirectional microphones and recorders with underwater hydrophone microphones. These recordings have a delicate quality because they direct recordings without sound textures of other artifacts in-

between. In the final piece, these two sonic textures of 'noise' and 'delicacy' (re)present the tension of being in the in-between, between the blurred sonic qualities of the past and the hypersensitization of the present. Thus, experimenting with sensibilities outside the colonial matrix, I found an alternative basis in praxis and materiality while navigating between colonial legacies of the 'West' and present narratives of the 'South.'

3. Oceans

I cannot help remembering my father when looking at the letters and postcards he used to send from Chile to Germany, where he described how this large puddle of water called the Atlantic separated us. Yet, the ocean space connected our ancestors to the global 'South.' When I started collecting materials about my family history, I realized that the common thread weaving these stories together was the narrative of saltwater spaces (oceans and seas), specifically the European seas such as the Mediterranean and the North Sea that were my ancestors' starting points towards the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Oceans have been a supposed separating element between continents, islands, and countries, a divisive colonial idea, but if we focus on the sea as a corridor where water moves through maritime currents, this conception of separation shifts, turning water into a connector of histories, stories, routes, and relationships (Ndikung and Römhild 2023). Oceans and seas are great spaces to reflect on decolonization processes, as navigating waters that lie between the idea of the 'West' and 'South' allows for holistic contemplation of both/multiple perspectives. From a 'third space' (between the 'West' and the 'South'), it is possible to appreciate the multiple narratives generated as we free ourselves from a pre-written colonial binary.

Postcolonial and decolonial studies have been interested in the oceans and seas as containers of sociopolitical and historical entanglement. From colonial trade routes to today's wars, the oceans have seen different layers of historical events that now form the basis for postcolonial and decolonial knowledge (Erbe 2018). New ocean studies have integrated this perspective and produced a heterogeneity of discourses on how the oceans divide but also unite continents, cultures, and thoughts.

Here, I do not want to leave out the tragic narratives of oceans and seas marked by dangerous past and present journeys where many fail to reach their final destination, such as the ones that take place in the Mediterranean and the English Channel today. Also, the Atlantic Ocean was key to the colonial slave trade, a forced migration that many did not survive. The repercussions of these tragic journeys are still present today. They are at the core of the oceans' and seas' narratives, marked by 'memories of loss,' as Arjun Appadurai (2003) refers to today's collective memory of migration.

Postcolonial scholars have also focused on oceans' circulation

relationships. The sociologist and cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1993), in his renowned book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, focused on the double consciousness of the African diaspora and its history of migration, using the image of the slave ship to represent bodies that are between lands, identities, cultures, pasts and futures—bodies that are impossible to define in terms of territorial borders and border regimes. *The Black Atlantic* transcends this diaspora's histories, defining the colonial legacy as 'the dark and well-hidden side of Western modernity' (Mignolo 2011: 2, cit. in Erbe 2019).

In a similar vein, environmental anthropologist Gísli Pálsson (1991), known for his work about fishing communities and their relationship with the ocean, argues that the supposedly isolated 'new' and 'old' worlds were in fact connected by colonial voyages, which he defines as a 'global but polarized network of power-relations' (p. xvii). Moreover, the writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa (1998), who explored how the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific islands experience the challenges of modernization, has reconceptualized the idea of the Pacific islands and their culture, people, and surroundings as a network of waters, which, rather than separating the lands, connect them into a 'sea of islands.' Hau'ofa revives the term 'Oceania' to encapsulate how the ocean is a pathway rather than a barrier for the Pacific islands' rich natural, historical, and cultural resources. The poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997) has similar reflections: his 'archipelagic thinking' alters our perspective by saying that the world is a largely connected archipelago (cit. in Erbe 2019).

Inspired by saltwater and the interconnected Mediterranean and North Seas and the Pacific Ocean as vessels for my own genealogy and many other time-space narratives, I experimented with varying sonic textures in the sound part of this contribution. I felt it was necessary to go beyond academic writing to find a comfortable poetic and artistic form for facing the question of how to decolonize oneself. By exposing myself to the oceans' and seas' sounds, vocal narration, and sonic archives, I was able to find a respectful and authentic way to address *mestizaje* and the colonial legacy in my own family genealogy. Thus, using the connections between oceans, lands, histories, and journeys; the abstraction and sonic materiality of oceans and seas as entangled elements of past-present-future narratives; and the notion of hybridization, I sought an answer to the question of self-decolonization.

1. The Dzjangal was a self-made settlement between the late 1990s and 2016, located in Calais, on the French-English border at the English Channel. The Dzjangal was pejoratively labeled by the mass media 'The Jungle,' phonetically interpreted from the word *Dzjangal* meaning forest, bush, and wood in the Pashto language and in Arabic dialects. Before the final demolition in 2016, there were about 8,000 people living there, mainly from the North and Horn of Africa and the Middle East (Garland, fieldnotes, 2022).

2. Tiburtina was a self-made settlement between the late 1990s and 2003, located in Rome. The name 'Tiburtina' was self-proclaimed by this settlement's community and referred to the nearby Tiburtina train station. It was also pejoratively labeled the 'Hotel Africa' by the Italian press for being a settlement inside a building inhabited by more than 800 people mostly from Eritrea and Ethiopia (Garland, fieldnotes, 2022).

3. Los Arenales has been a self-made settlement since 2015, located on the edge of the Atacama Desert in the upper part of Antofagasta, Chile. The name 'Los Arenales' was given to the settlement by its community to refer to the sandy territory that houses this macro-settlement, consisting of six camps with 3,000 people, mainly from Caribbean countries (Garland, fieldnotes, 2022).

4. By 'field recording artists,' I mean artists who engage in the artistic practice of field recording, as described by the curator Manel Benchabane: '[F]ield recording consists in recording sound landscapes in specific natural or built environments, in order to give sustained attention to the sounds that make up these landscapes' (2017). Field recording practice is the 'sound perception' recorded and produced outside of a recording studio, focusing on recording human and non-human sounds as well as soil vibrations and underwater field recordings, among others. See Shane and Benchabane 2017.

5. See 'Nick Kuepfer' on Constellation's website: cstrecords.com/en-int/pages/nick-kuepfer (07/01/2024).

6. See Jana Winderen's website: www.janawinderen.com(04/01/2024).

7. The word *mestizaje* is the Spanish translation of 'miscegenation,' which refers to a biological and cultural mixing between different ethnicities. In a postcolonial era, 'miscegenation' is considered derogatory due to its racist connotation implying that one of the ethnic groups is 'superior and purer' than the other. *Mestizaje* has been used mainly to define Latin American identity, referring to the mixtures between Europeans and indigenous people. Since the 1930s, the term has been widespread in many Latin American countries in an effort to eradicate racial conflict and foster a national identity (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). From a decolonial lens, *mestizaje* continues to hide racial structures, especially those groups that have a major indigenous ancestry. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) draws on the definition of the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, who calls *mestizaje* a 'cosmic race' in opposition to the theories of 'pure Aryan,' to formulate her ideas about a 'new *mestiza* consciousness,' which is a person conscious of its hybridity and borderland (p. 99).

Sound piece transcription

Between the 'West' and the 'South'

TRACK 1
Decolonize as a verb,
Decolonize as an action,
Decolonize as a narrative,
Decolonize as a memory,
Decolonize as a way of thinking.
How can one decolonize oneself?

In-between geographical borders,
South American genealogy,
A history marked by forced *mestizaje.*

My own family history, Chilean with European roots.
My mother with an Italian past,
My father with a British heritage in the Chilean desert.

TRACK 2
...This is Britain's colonial empire, two and a half million square miles from the Antarctic to the tropics, with dependencies in every continent and every ocean.

The people of Britain are directly responsible for the well-being of all the people of the colony. There are 60 million of them: men, women and children of every race, color, and creed, with 100 different languages, hundreds of different customs and ways of living.
To guide and develop this last empire is no easy matter. Hong Kong in the Far East, with its constantly shifting population of Chinese, presents very different problems from Fiji and the islands of the Pacific.

TRACK 1
My great-great-grandfather was part of the so-called 'glorious' saltpeter era:
Today, a tragic story of extraposition of indigenous Altiplanic lands.

How can one decolonize the self when it is between the global 'South' and the 'West'?

Multiple histories, mixing past and present, languages, rhythms, and sonorities,
The personal feeling of being 'in-between,'
As one navigates through the European colonial legacy between the 'West'

and the 'South.'

Hybrid cultures,
Hybridization,
Borderland.

Decolonize as a verb,
As an action,
As a history,
As a memory,
Decolonize as a way of thinking.

Contrasts between the 'West' and the 'South.'
My own genealogy of being in-between,
Like being on the borderline.
Narrative entanglements between the 'South' and the 'West'
crossing oceans and seas.

TRACK 3 (Original audio in Spanish)
...which prevailed in Europe and later in America and greatly influenced the formation of a new race in the new world. From ancient times, our land has been linked to the great Italian nation...

The Italian people were forged in sacrifice. Many were the episodes in its men's and women's lives that tested their courage and strength. The resilience of the Italian people has always been enormous. The pride of those who feel strong, their awareness of their capacity...

TRACK 1
Aquatic narratives of colonial and decolonial histories.
Mediterranean, North Sea, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans.

Oceans shelter histories,
Oceans are not an 'empty space,'
Oceans are full and rich with stories, histories, relationships,
Connections and entanglements,
Similar stories and roots cross these waters.

Decolonize as a verb,
As an action,
As a story,
As a memory,
Decolonial as a way of thinking.

How can one decolonize oneself when one is between the 'West' and the

'South'?
Is ocean narrative an alternative answer to decolonizing oneself?

Between the 'West' and the 'South.'

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Montage of Freedom. Phonesia: The Art of Logo-Somatic Articulation through Encounter with Other Livings

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Montage of Freedom. Phonesia: The Art of Logo-Somatic Articulation through Encounter with Other Livings

Anatoli Vlassov

This article delves into the concept of logo-somatic freedom through an analysis of three artworks: *Chairs Mots*, *Diaphoner*, and *#DanseAvecLesMots*. These works exemplify how encounters with 'other livings'—including language, dance, and digital technology—foster and enrich logo-somatic freedom, transcending conventional boundaries between language, body, artist, audience, and technology. Through practices such as phonesia, participatory performance, and online interaction, the artworks showcase the transformative potential of corporeal poetics and synesthetic communication. The exploration of logo-somatic freedom reveals a perpetual process of metamorphosis in the relationship between body and language, where the deconstruction of logo-somatic expressive habits goes hand-in-hand with the free will of their poetic recomposition. By fostering collective dialogue and individual creativity, these artworks pave the way for innovative forms of artistic expression and collective engagement in the contemporary world. This essay's exploration of logo-somatic freedom across these artworks highlights its ongoing evolution and its role in shaping the future of artistic expression.

> What is important is not what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens to us.
>
> *Jean-Paul Sartre (1952: 63)*

Montage of Freedom

In this essay, I share with you my process in inventing a performative technique called *phonesia*, which allows for a simultaneous articulation of dance and speech and for a reconfiguration of the relationship between gestures and words. This invention was born out of a felt need to decolonize my body and its sensations from the oppressive and denigrating words that

I have endured in my personal history, particularly from my father and from teachers in school. By expanding this individual issue to more collective realms, I believe I have glimpsed a tradition in the history of live performance that also imposed a form of language oppression on the body. For example, in opera until the nineteenth century, to produce the 'ideal' voice of a castrato, boy singers' testicles were removed: amputating a part of the body was meant to preserve the 'purity' of a childlike voice. In classical theater, the text often took precedence over everything else, subjecting the actor's body to the intelligibility of their words. In choreography, the dancer was always muted, following a doctrine that reduced them to being merely a body available for movement.

On the other hand, in Western philosophy, many thinkers have also testified to the oppressive, even totalitarian effects of language on the human body. Roland Barthes (1979) goes so far as to label language as fascist: 'Language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is simply fascist; because fascism does not prevent speech but compels speech' (p. 5). Faced with this observation, he proposes literature as a possibility to 'hear language outside of power' (Barthes 1979: 4). Giorgio Agamben (2007) describes language as a device that captures the discourses and gestures of living beings. He defines a device as 'anything that, in one way or another, has the capacity to capture, direct, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings' (p. 26). Faced with this linguistic peculiarity, the philosopher suggests poetry as a means to deactivate language. For him, poetry is an 'operation in language that deactivates and disemploys communicative and informative functions to open them to a new possible usage' (Agamben 2018: 65). Alain Badiou (bioecon tv 2022), on his part, denounces the hegemony of the 'language of money' and emphasizes the responsibility of contemporary artists in inventing new fictions to replace those of capitalism, which mainly revolve around competitive and monetary values. As for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), they propose to stretch language with an 'atypical expression' that varies standard forms to take them out of their normativity: 'Atypical expression constitutes a point of deterritorialization of language; it plays the role of a tensor, that is, it makes language tend towards a limit of its elements, forms, or notions, towards a beyond or below of language' (p. 125).

These foundational premises—encompassing both personal psychological sensations and collective observations—are what drove me to develop a new technique. This technique would serve to rebalance the dynamic between body and language, embodying resistance against language oppression through the medium of dance. I would call this technique phonesia, a means by which my moving body could influence my spoken language, diverting my logo-somatic automatism into ever-renewing poetic mutations—achieved through the montage of gestures and words, executed according to my free will. Freedom is here delineated as my ability to make choices regarding both the occurrences in my life (my automatism)

and the poetic transformations I aspire to achieve. This act of montage, extending beyond mere liberation, not only dismantles existing chains but also lays the foundation, through an ongoing process of decision-making, for the creation of innovative poetic artifacts.

In the case of phonesia, the 'existing chains' are the logo-somatic automatisms that link the pronunciation of words (verbal language) to bodily gestures (non-verbal language); the 'innovative poetic artifacts' are new poetic arrangements between spoken words and bodily gestures; and the 'montage of freedom' is the perpetual process of decision-making and de(re) articulation between these same words and gestures. Phonesia enables my emancipatory process through three stages: it undoes the automatisms that link my pronunciation of words to my bodily movements (desynchronization); then it makes choices for de(re)articulation (montage); and afterwards it welcomes new logo-somatic artifacts (poetic awareness). Put very simply, I am proposing a logo-somatic freedom formula for phonesia as follows: Phonesic freedom (F) = Desynchronization of logo-somatic automatisms (D) + Montage of spoken words and bodily gestures according to free will (M) + Poetic conscientization of new logo-somatic artifacts (P)

$$F = D + M + P$$

This formula seeks to express a perpetual process of metamorphosis in the relationship between body and language, where the deconstruction of logo-somatic expressive habits goes hand in hand with the free will of their poetic recomposition.

Encounter with Other Livings

I also emphasize that, as I created phonesia as a performative technique, its emancipatory aspect was shaped through modulation around the notions of the 'other' and the 'living,' or what I would more precisely call 'the other livings.' This involves a speculative shift of the concept of alterity to include what is not always considered as part of the paradigm of the living. In my case, it pertains to language, dance, and technology. This speculative reevaluation of alterity as a form of living I have worked out through my three distinct artistic works (*Chairs Mots*, *Diaphoner*, *#DanseAvecLesMots*) that have acted on three scales: that of the Self, the Other, and the World.

The interactive performance *Chairs Mots*[1] explored the scale of the Self, specifically as an encounter of a 'speaking dancer' (Vlassov 2023b) with himself, where language and dance were reconsidered as 'the other livings.' The participatory spectacle *Diaphoner*[2] delved into the scale of the Other, particularly through an encounter between the performer and spectators, where the spectators were reconsidered as 'the other livings,' taking on the roles of language and dance as if they were semi-human life forms. Then, the interactive streaming performance *#DanseAvecLesMots*[3] explored the scale of the World, specifically as an encounter between the online performer and

online spectators, where digital technology was reconsidered as 'the other living.'

The rest of this essay is structured as a poïetic[4] exploration of the three above-mentioned dimensions. It presents the creation-research-technique approach of an artist who not only creates artworks and the discourse that accompanies them but also invents his own performative technique—an artistic act of freedom in itself, as it allows the artist-researcher-technician to emancipate himself from the artistic and academic worlds which he navigates.

1. Encounter with the Self

> The word passes through the individual, defines a state,
> illuminates a sequence of the material world;
> proposes also another state.
>
> *René Char (Charpier 1950: 4)*

Phonesia is a performative technique for a speaking dancer that I have been developing for several years (Vlassov 2018). It involves a simultaneous articulation of dance and speech in a specific manner. The uniqueness of this articulation lies in its impact on the structure of dance and spoken language and thus on the automatisms that link gestures and words. In everyday verbal and gestural communication, certain gestures often go hand in hand with specific words and expressions. However, the speaking dancer continually reorganizes these habitual patterns. For example, when I pronounce words and phrases while dancing, I ensure that the movements of my body influence the structure of the spoken language I use.

In my performance *Chairs Mots*, the audience is invited to suggest words of their choice to the speaking dancer. Words thus emerge from the mouths of spectators to land in the artist's glottis, who then engages simultaneously in speech and movement. To describe what happens within me (as a speaking dancer) when a spectator gives me a word—such as the word 'phonesia,' for example—and I articulate the pronunciation of that word with the dance, I offer here an auto-ethnographic note which represents the transcription of my inner experience. In this transcription, everything spoken by me is in italics, while the non-italicized text describes what is happening in my mind and what this conscientization is doing to the dance movement. This text is excerpted from my article 'La Phonésie':

PHONESIA

'—*Phooooneeeeeeesy, PhOOOOOOOne*—It stretches my voice, rounds my mouth, opens my arms, bulges my eyes—Immersed in the first syllable, my attention finds itself in the stretched granularity of sound—

PhOOOOooOOne—This modulated elongation ignites the current of my thought through the meaning of the word "phoné," which means "voicing" in ancient Greek—I take advantage of this transfer from vocalization to meaning to chew the whole—*PhoOOne phOOOOne PHonéÉÉ*—This word-voice makes my spine undulate, merging with the sound of vowels. A space-time opens up for what follows—' (Vlassov 2018).

One can see here that the words are initially pronounced in their semantically correct form, then the dance movements affect the pronunciation of these words, transforming them into other syllabic vocalizations, and subsequently, they morph into new words and phrases.

Another word, 'performative,' is provided by the spectator, and I start to perform this word using phonesia:

PERFORMATIVE

'—*Peeeerfoooormaaatiiiive père fort père fOrt Pèèère fOOrt*—I freeze in a static posture, muscles tense—*Fort fOoort forme. père FORMS the form, fOrme la pair PAire*—This new meaning prompts me to observe my motionless body—*FooorMAT formateR fOOrma-ter*—The desire to inhabit this tenacious structure leads me to shake it from the inside with antagonistic movements—*mater fOrt. Mater mOts... my fAthEr mAstErEd my wOrds*—A memory of my mathematician father sparks within me—The dance, torn from within, stretches into song and emerges from my mouth—*fooormater mooots tiques, maux TIQUE, maAA tique... iiiinformatique... maathematically pathetic*—' (Vlassov 2018).

It is as if the body of the speaking dancer were a giant mouth that swallowed

verbs and phrases, then digested them by circulating them throughout its entire palate and spat them out in a different semantic form. Just as gestures can influence the structure of spoken language, the meaning of the words used can, in turn, transform the structure of the movements being danced. Thus, phonesia enables a dual process of de-automatization and recomposition of the structural connections that occur between the human subject, their words, and their gestures. The significance of this restructuring lies in its capacity to transcend conventional boundaries between body and language. By cultivating a symbiotic relationship between danced gestures and spoken words, phonesia surpasses a mere mechanical reorganization. It evolves into an artistic exploration, enabling the body to become a dynamic and fluid expression of speech, and vice versa. This meaningful transformation introduces a fresh dimension to human expression, broadening creative possibilities and challenging established norms in verbal and bodily communication.

The fact that the spectators give me words takes me into an imaginary realm where a form of alterity enters into me. It is as if something from elsewhere injects itself inside me, setting me in motion. What if I consider these words part of life forms other than human? For example, what if language were a form of life?[5] A semantic organism whose evolution is not only linked to anthropological transformations but also changes independently of humans, following its own structural mutations? And what if dance (and therefore my physical gestures, which encounter these words from the spectator in my corporeality), too, were a form of life? A somatic organism this time, one that transforms itself thanks to and with humans, but also has its own evolutionary autonomy? Thus, both language with its words, phrases, and accents, and dance with its gestures, sequences of movements, and bodily postures, are organisms that are not specifically botanical or zoological but nevertheless *biological*: living organisms that evolve not only through the human species but also independently; semantic and somatic organisms that, like other forms of life, live, die, and perpetuate their existence.[6]

In this sense, a speaking being is not alone during their act of enunciation but is in the presence of a language and a dance that manifest themselves with them. When they express themselves, they are no longer the sole producer of their discourse but become co-authors of a dance engaged with the words and gestures that flow through them. This anthropo-logo-somatic choreography constitutes a heterogeneous and fluid ecosystem that I will henceforth call *corpArléité*. This concept refers to a symbiotic environment where, as I have already written elsewhere, 'the human, language, and dance form a network of exchange and interdependence' (Vlassov quoted in Legrady 2019), and they manifest themselves in an association that is both intimate, dynamic, and heterogeneous. In the history of ideas, the concept of corpArléité seeks to extend the notions of 'body' and 'corporeality,' while emphasizing them through the presence of language. As a theoretical concept, it itself stems from the technique of phonesia,

organizing a framework to approach creation-research-technique whose aim is to reinvigorate the power dynamics between the body and language. If, until recently, as we have seen, it was the body that was dominated by language, in today's 'society of control,' as discussed by Deleuze (1987), we can observe a reversal of this power dynamic: language can also be dominated by the body, because today, power is exerted through the body and its desires, dictating individuals' behaviors. During a critical seminar on Pietro Montani's book *Bioestetica: Senso comune, tecnica e arte nell'età della globalizzazione* [*Bio-aesthetics: Common Sense, Technique, and Art in the Age of Globalization*], philosopher Bernard Stiegler mentions a metaphysical reversal in contemporary times:

> 'If we posit that metaphysics begins with Plato as a subjugation of the body to the soul, here we are in a case where, through biopolitics, it is the soul that is subjected to the body. A body that is itself disorganized, de-noetized, and ultimately assigned to what I call a symbolic misery' (CRAL — Centre de Recherches 2014).

Whether in the past or present, the question within the ecosystem of *corpArléité* is, in fact, political, as the abuse of power exists in both cases (domination of language or domination of the body). *CorpArléité* thus proposes an environment for addressing these power relations of domination. And since *corpArléité* treats dance and language as forms of life, it is more about biopolitics, meaning coexistence among different life forms in the same ecosystem. Michel Foucault (1976) called this biopolitics—a concept he used to describe the exercise of power not over territories and subjects, as in the old legal model, but over the body and the very life of humans. However, *corpArléité* offers a framework for the distribution of biopower among the human, the linguistic, and the somatic, and consequently for rebalancing the forces between these three forms of life. These notions of biopolitics and biopower, of which Foucault makes an anthropocentric use, can, in my opinion, be extended to the non-human, to a biodiversity of the living, and therefore also to the forms of semantic and somatic life.

In *corpArléité*, the goal is not to establish mathematical equality between saying and doing, but to give the meanings of gestures as much importance as the sense of words. *CorpArléité* is there to establish an environment that makes possible not only the dehierarchization of the body and language but also the reanimation of their relationship; somatic and linguistic biopowers can invent their own choreography. So, viewing the relation between human, dance, and language as a choreography of different life forms helps transcend the usual binary between discourse and action, and replace it with an ecological relationship. Our perspective shifts—from anthropocentrism towards seeing a human person as part of an ecosystem, which opens up the prospect of creating a common good for humans and two other forms of somatic and semantic life. Through this ecological stance, the protagonist of *corpArléité* becomes aware of the broader forces within them and the possibility of engaging in dialogue with them. They are no longer

under the illusion of isolated expression but partaking in shared enunciation.

2. Encounter with the Other

Now, let us see how this logo-somatic freedom can not only be shared with other human beings (the spectators) but also experienced by and with them. In the participatory performance *Diaphoner*, I offered the audience, after sharing some phonesia tools with them, the opportunity to stage the concept of *corpArléité*. Inviting three individuals onto the stage, I asked one of them to generate a flow of words to represent language (a semantic form of life), another to produce movements to represent dance (a somatic form of life), and the third to embody a human form of life that blends the gestures and words from the other two participants. Here is a transcription of a spectator who becomes a speaking dancer when performing phonesia based on the words 'forms of life,' with another spectator playing the role of language and yet another playing the role of dance:

<div align="center">

FORMS OF LIFE

</div>

'—I watch one person dancing while simultaneously listening to another person beginning their verbal variation around the words "form of life": *"Forms of life. For lives form. Guess which one is life..."*—I start uttering fragments of what I can remember from these words, all the while attempting to mimic the movements of the other person, who is writhing as if possessed by tremors throughout their body—*Forrr fort of lifffffffffffffff...* —On the stretched sound of *"ffffffffffffff,"* my body's tremors begin to synchronize with my voice. It's as if the sound of my voice has become the sound generated by my tremors—*fffffffffffff...* —I tremble. *"fffffffffffff..."*—I tremble at the same time I *"fffffffffffff..."*—Suddenly, the person verbalizing their poetic words stops. Consequently, I stop making the *"ffffffffffffff"* sound. However, my body continues to tremble because the other person keeps trembling. So, I find myself trembling in silence. I tremble, and I *"............"*—The person verbalizing resumes generating language: *Life is a form. A form of life. A spiral distorts. A spiral life*—My body is still trembling. In silence. While still trembling, I start pronouncing snippets of words that I "catch" from the vocalizing spectator: *life is form of life life spirale life, spiiiiiiireal, real reaaaaaal, real real real real real real real...*—The spectator who was producing the trembling dance stops trembling and begins another series of movements—sort of spirals coursing through their entire body—Meanwhile, still pronouncing the word *"real,"* I also take up this spiraling movement. I feel my spine curling in on itself, slowly but surely—*real real real real real real real...*—'

Through this role-play, this spectator, who turns into a 'speaking dancer,' becomes a crossroads where transduction between words and movements takes place. He becomes the medium of logo-somatic circulation. Far from being a passive conduit, he is an active agent in this circulation; he is not

merely subject to the vital forces that flow through him but participates in what happens to him by making choices through his phonesic montage. This is how this third spectator-dancing-speaker represents a form of human life that encounters the other two forms of life, semantic and somatic. To draw a parallel with cinema, I would like to reference Jean-Luc Godard's (1985) reflection on the concept of montage: 'Cinema is not one image after another; it is one image plus another image that together form a third' (p. 460). In another text, he continues:

Figure 2. Anatoli Vlassov, *Diaphoner,* 2020. © Pavko Krajka, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'The third: the current between a positive pole and a negative pole. The third, a child between two genders. The third, a thousand-dollar bill between two hands. The third, a delegate between a master and a slave. The third, knowledge between a student and a teacher. The third, a dream between yesterday and today tomorrow' (Godard, quoted in Forum des images 2010).

If Godard talks about montage as a current that flows between two images to reveal a third one, then the third person in the 'spectator-dancer-speaker' trio allows this same current to flow between one spectator's words and another's movements. If we consider these three individuals as a whole, we can see that human nature is no longer alone inside it but coexists with two other forms of life. Within the spectator-dancer-speaker trio, human life is demoted in favor of an encounter with alterity, that of other livings: dance and language as forms of life.

From a person-device to a person-ecosystem

The decreasing human role of the third person within *corpArléité* shifts the speaking being, as I mentioned earlier, away from their anthropocentric stance, allowing them to make space for other forms of life and participate in the production of a shared act of enunciation. The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2012), in his book *Third Person*, exposes that in our control society, the individual becomes a device to exploit, and reflects on ways of life that can mitigate this orientation. Esposito (2012) defines the 'person-device' as a set of identifications (such as name, face, gender, nationality, personal biography) that allows the individual to exist in their social environment but, at the same time, creates an effect of exclusion for other humans and also enables the state apparatus to capture individuals within what Barbara Cassin (2014) calls 'evaluation grids.' These grids are classifications that shape all human beings by defining them solely by their performative and quantifiable actions, in order to reduce them to devices to be governed. To break free from these societal cages, Esposito (2012) proposes the more impersonal notion of a third person, a notion that incorporates 'she' or 'he' into the 'I-you' relationship. Esposito suggests this concept of the third person as a way to transcend the limitations imposed by societal categorizations, aiming to foster a relational dynamic that goes beyond the confines of gender-based roles and expectations, allowing for a more fluid and equitable 'I-you' interaction. By making room for a third person within the individual, the philosopher gives space to that other who resides within us all. As Arthur Rimbaud (1871/2009) once said, 'I is another,' and it is through this other that 'the poet becomes a seer through a lengthy, immense, and reasoned derangement of all the senses' (p. 343).

Thus, it is by shifting the focus towards the otherness of dance and language that a speaking dancer becomes this 'third person.' And even though this posture abolishes a human being's monopoly over their act of enunciation, it still grants them the possibility to participate in it actively and liberally. This new stance of freedom allows them not only to regulate the vital forces within them but also, through this participation, to bring forth new logo-somatic creations. It is by no means about controlling life; it is about dancing with life. I would replace the verb 'to dance' with 'to tense' because it involves a movement that is neither a confrontation nor an agreement, but a perpetual back-and-forth movement of resistance and collaboration (Vlassov 2015).

If Charles Darwin, an English naturalist and Victorian bourgeois, based his studies on the competitive aspect of survival among species, the Russian geographer, naturalist, and anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1902/1976)—in the same era of the nineteenth century—provided numerous examples of cooperation where species helped each other in their respective survival. Darwin and Kropotkin arrived at different conclusions due to their opposing political ideas, but also because they worked in regions of the world with different climates: Darwin explored the tropical Galapagos Islands where, in

the face of overpopulation, competition was the most suitable solution; and Kropotkin conducted his experiments in the vast and sparsely populated expanses of Siberia, where harsh conditions made it more likely for animals that cooperated to survive. Whether it is competition or mutual aid, life finds its most suitable expression according to various contexts.

CorpArléité is thus the field of experience where the three forms of life—human, somatic, and linguistic—*tense* within a common ecosystem. They do not fight for 'natural selection,' nor do they help each other for any moral reasons. Together, they compose an act of enunciation whose content they do not predict in advance. *CorpArléité* is therefore a person-ecosystem where the human, language, and dance come together to bring forth the unknown. Within this person-ecosystem, the convergence of human, language, and dance cultivates a space for collective narratives that challenge today's 'society of control,' fostering an inclusive exploration of diverse perspectives. This collaborative endeavor to unveil the unknown intricately intertwines with self-liberation, shaping a future that embraces pluralistic expressions and redefines its trajectory: a future of life.

3. Encounter with the World

Let us delve even further into the concept of 'other livings' to expand our understanding to the realm of digital technology and see how this logo-somatic freedom operates among people who create together via the internet.

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, I initiated the project *#DanseAvecLesMots* (Dance with Words), where I would daily invite viewers on my Facebook page[7] to provide words in real-time for me to immediately integrate into a dance performance in front of them. To my surprise, shortly after its launch, the project took an unexpected turn. Some viewers began to interact with me not only with isolated words, as initially proposed, but also with objects, drawings, and pieces of music. An even more surprising evolution occurred as some viewers started performing simultaneously with me during my live streams: shasring improvised poetic texts, instant drawings, graphic collages, sound and image remixes of the live broadcasts into musical compositions and videos, parallel performances—a profusion of creative gestures emerged around this confined rendezvous.[8] I responded to this abundance myself: every evening, right after my live streams, I composed a graphic work I called *Tenseurs Images*, where I assembled photos, drawings, and texts from all these people who were performing with me. Then, one by one, I invited viewers to perform with me with the help of a split screen: the screen divided into two, with the host occupying one half and the guest the other. *#DanseAvecLesMots* lasted for fifty-one days and concluded with the end of the first lockdown in May 2020.

But how can we explain this creative outburst? Here, I propose that this enthusiasm for singular creativity was made possible not only through

the liberating performativity of logo-somatic automatism of phonesia but also due to the interactivity of the digital streaming platform, which could be described as @live. I intentionally replace here the letter 'a' with the symbol '@' because I believe that nothing can replace the presence of live dance in a live performance. I share Elena Polivtseva's (2020) view expressed in her article on live arts in the virtualization world that 'live arts have a unique power to place us in the "here and now," where we are exposed to a reality at a given moment, without any intermediary means of communication' (p. 12). However, the pandemic thrust live performance artists into a situation where this *in vivo* presence was simply impossible. And it was through digital technology that performers were able to compensate for this absence of a living presence while continuing what was vital to them, namely, sharing their dances with the audience. But let us see if, within this seemingly non-living digital technology, there might, after all, exist a hint of the living.

Screens as Quasi-Subjects

It is no coincidence that the word 'live' stands for 'live internet broadcasting,' which refers to live streaming on the internet that emerged around the 2010s. The word 'live' emphasizes a new form of online communication where, using a webcam and a microphone (portable or not), one can become a creator of their own content, akin to a personal television channel. Therefore, *#DanseAvecLesMots* is a video stream where a human subject interacts in real-time with an audience. Here, the digital screen itself is not just a passive object but an active, even *living*, device.

Philosopher Mauro Carbone (2016) defines screens as 'quasi-subjects.' In his book *Philosophy-Screens, from Cinema to the Digital Revolution*, he begins his reflection by tracing the history of screens, which, in his view, existed long before the technical sense of the term. For Carbone, screens have existed 'forever,' specifically since humans projected their shadows onto their surroundings. By echoing Plato's description of shadows as a first image, Carbone posits that in this case, the human body can be considered a proto-screen. When discussing cinematic and multimedia screens in particular, he draws from Mikel Dufrenne's (1953/2011) ideas to claim that screens are 'quasi-subjects.' Screens, as part of aesthetic artifacts, are capable of their own expressions and actions. They have always influenced the human subjects who use them. For Carbone (2016), screens are alluring because they 'both divert and captivate,' hiding and revealing while provoking in viewers an experience that is perceptual, affective, and somatic at once (p. 74). Between the screen and the viewer, there exists a symbiotic relationship, where a sensory object and a perceiving subject come together to form, as Dufrenne said, an 'indiscernible' whole (Dufrenne 2011: 425, cited in Carbone 2016: 132). Through this interdependent relationship between subject and object, 'the aesthetic object will then reveal itself to be endowed with its own world, with its own particular sensory and affective

structure' (Carbone 2011: 132). This is where the technical screen and the human subject, the technical object, and the living body merge, forming, as Carbone (2011) says citing philosopher Gilbert Simondon, a 'coupling' (Simondon 1958/2012, cited in Carbone: 167).

Simondon always advocated for a reconciliation between the world of craftsmanship and the world of ideas in a technology that, for him, not only belongs to humans but also makes humans. It is through and thanks to our technical acts that humans evolve and become what distinguishes them from other animals. Technical objects are not just tools that humans use; they are organs through which we perceive the world. The particularity of these technical organs is that they are both supports and hindrances since, even as they enhance our capacity to act, they also condition that capacity through their enhancement. Thus, as Carbone (2011) posits, they are prostheses—portable and detachable technical extensions that allow us to 'amplify and even alter human possibilities for perceiving (understood as inseparable from moving), experiencing emotions, knowing, and acting' (p. 152). Technical prostheses amplify our relationship with the world while modifying it.

Synesthetic communication

Now, let us see how the screen of *#DanseAvecLesMots* puts people in communication while reconfiguring that communication. Analogous to a screen that extends but also transforms our perceptions, the digital screen of *#DanseAvecLesMots* is a prosthesis that enables the interactive performer in the live stream (whom I will now refer to as the inter@ctor) to both extend and alter the performativity of their dialogue with the audience. Indeed, if I compare what happens between two people in an *in vivo* dialogue (like for example in the *in vivo* performance *Diaphoner*, described above) with what happens in a *#DanseAvecLesMots* dialogue, they are very different. In *in vivo* dialogic communication, the different communicative gestures of each interlocutor are organized into a unity: words, voice, intonation, facial expression, and body movements are all associated within a monist communicative structure. However, during a live broadcast of *#DanseAvecLesMots*, the inter@ctor cannot see or hear the viewer (whom I will now call the spect@tor). Thus, the inter@ctor only perceives the words written by their interlocutor. One could say that the *#DanseAvecLesMots* setup significantly alters the usual dialogic communication by emphasizing its semantic dimension while removing its somatic aspect. Conversely, from the perspective of the spect@tor, the perception of the interlocutor is enhanced because the inter@ctor not only speaks but also dances simultaneously.

The spect@tor, however, can neither be seen nor heard; they can only write their words. What's interesting here is that, by writing these words, the
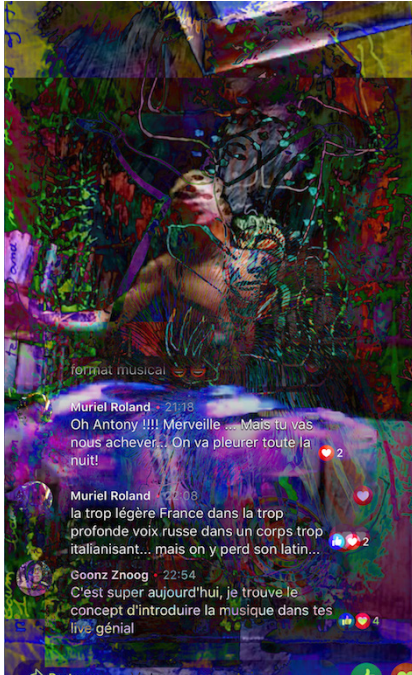
Figure 3. Anatoli Vlassov, *#DanseAvecLesMots*, 2020. © Anatoli Vlassov, all rights reserved, used with permission.

spect@tor touches the touchscreen or keyboard of the computer. It is as if the spect@tor is speaking through touch. If Antonin Artaud (1938/1985) invites us in his book *The Theater and Its Double* to 'break language to touch life' (p. 7), here it is about entering the screen with language in order to touch life. This synesthetic aspect of the exchange between the sensory and the intelligible, and vice versa, aligns with the goal of phonesia to free logo-somatic automatisms, generating what I call *Sens-Ations*—events on the scale of an individual speaking body where meaning transforms into sensation and vice versa (Vlassov 2021). In other words, phonesia rearticulates correspondences between words and gestures and provokes transmutations between semantics and somatics. Thus, within the framework of *#DanseAvecLesMots* the spect@tor and the inter@ctor 'touch' each other thanks to the screen in a relationship which transmutes the carnal into language.

Screen @live

It is through the screen's synesthetic aspect that, in *#DanseAvecLesMots*, it comes to life. This happens because, through its prosthetic function that both enables and restricts communication, it reorganizes and restructures the sensory-semiotic way its user engages with the world. As this transformation is made possible through the internet, I would like to refer to this interactive digital screen of *#DanseAvecLesMots* as the 'screen @live'—'@live' replacing 'alive' to emphasize the technical aspect of the connection between

individuals. The '@' symbol is used in email addresses to connect a user to a domain. By replacing the letter 'a' with '@' in this context, I underline the link that connects the protagonists of *#DanseAvecLesMots*. This concept aligns with what Bernard Stiegler refers to as 'exo-somatization' (Adrien Payet 2016/2020), drawing on the terminology of American mathematician and statistician Alfred Lotka. It represents a process wherein the coupling between humans and technology evolves in a dual movement of disintegration and reintegration. In other words, screens, which can be considered prostheses or, as Stiegler terms them, exo-somatic organs, both degrade and enhance human beings. To think and engage with this paradoxical dynamic is essential if we want to shape our lives in relation to screens constructively, aiming to minimize their tendency to introduce separation into our existence. In this sense, *#DanseAvecLesMots*, with its screen @live aspect, facilitates this regenerative circulation of the relationship between humans and their technology.

Connective Art

#DanseAvecLesMots has successfully leveraged the live streaming technological setup, particularly the interactivity it allows. Through live streaming, dialogues have been established within the project on various levels: within the speaking dancer himself, between his words and gestures; between the speaking dancer and the spectators through words exchanged via the live streaming instant messaging; among different spectators (comments on each performance) through the same instant messaging. This multiplicity of dialogues implies a dense circulation of statements and expressions, along with attentive listening and responsive viewing. This active receptivity has not only encouraged spectators to watch but also to write, comment, and ultimately perform their own artistic uniqueness, a phenomenon I have previously defined as 'connective art' (Vlassov 2023a): 'art' because this project has generated creations that are both aesthetic and ethical responses to the challenges of a given context (the COVID-19 lockdown), and 'connective' because it has fostered a collective in a cyberspace where various connected individuals have generated a flow of creative gestures, thereby giving rise to a new form of collective creation.

It is through this active and attentive connectivity that the aesthetic aspect of *#DanseAvecLesMots* is complemented by its liberating aspect. Whether in the realm of creation or within a healthcare context, we all need to be listened to and heard. In an article I wrote about my collaborations with autistic performers, I approach the notion of care not as medicalized support (which is inherently unequal) but as 'sensitive attention given to differences' (Vlassov 2019). Although we are not in an autistic context here (there is only one letter of difference between the words 'autistic' and 'artistic'), uniqueness is paramount in artistic creation. The dialogic environment of *#DanseAvecLesMots* has, therefore, created a conducive

milieu for both creation and creative freedom in a time of crisis. In this sense, whereas screens connect us while also creating a distance, and the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the need for relationships, *#DanseAvecLesMots* has addressed this dual aesthetic and liberating challenge by establishing not just a polyphony but a genuine ecosystem of creative relationships, a dense network of artistic singularities for new ways of being together.

Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of logo-somatic freedom, expressed at the outset through the formula 'Phonesic Freedom = Desynchronization of Logo-Somatic Automatisms + Montage of Spoken Words and Performed Gestures through Free Will + Poetic Conscientization of New Logo-Somatic Artifacts,' appears in a thread that connects the three artworks we have explored: *Chairs Mots*, *Diaphoner*, and *#DanseAvecLesMots*. These pieces of art provide fertile ground for examining how this formula manifests uniquely while demonstrating that the encounter with the 'other livings' is an essential element in nurturing this freedom.

In *Chairs Mots*, the desynchronization of logo-somatic automatisms is embodied in composing where words become flesh. This desynchronization reveals a *corpArléité* that comes to life through the poetic encounter between language and body. The work transcends conventional boundaries between word and gesture, unveiling a new form of expression where speech resonates together with dance. The poetic conscientization of the resulting new logo-somatic artifacts opens unexplored expressive horizons, thereby liberating unsuspected poetic potential. Here, decolonization occurred at an individual level, within the scope of my personal individuation. By practicing phonesia in interaction with the audience, I could decolonize myself from the logo-somatic habits I possess. Deconstructing and instantly recomposing these structurally bound arrangements of my body and language allowed me to make choices in how I compose my new phonesic reality.

In *Diaphoner*, the concept of logo-somatic freedom is explored in the context of a participatory performance where it is the spectators who make the experience. Here, the desynchronization of logo-somatic automatisms is staged through the encounter of three forms of life: language, dance, and humans. This desynchronization becomes a crossroads where the transmutation between words and gestures of multiple people takes place, liberating the individual from their anthropocentric stance. By composing *corpArléité* together this time, the spectators become mediators of a new form of expression where multiple forms of life coexist in mutual reciprocity. This collective experience reflects the convergence of living alterities, illustrating how logo-somatic freedom can be shared and lived together. In this sense, I observed how the way I communicate with another human is decolonized. I experienced the possibility of an alternate form of communication and genuine encounters with others, communicating in a

new mode beyond conventional languages.

In *#DanseAvecLesMots*, logo-somatic freedom takes on an innovative and dynamic form thanks to digital technology. The project becomes a @live screen where the desynchronization of logo-somatic automatisms occurs between the streaming performer inte@ctor and online spect@tors. The synesthetic interactions between spoken dance and live-written words reveal how technology can both alter and amplify communication among participants. The @live screen becomes an organ of expression that brings individuals together from a distance, creating a connective ecosystem where singular creativity is supported by others. In this context, decolonization of the usual ways of collective action took place. From a distance but nevertheless together, we managed to bring forth an entire creative process and create a work which was unforeseen from the start. Moreover, as a live performance artist, I was able to decolonize the usual ways of forming my own audience. While I generally use conventional networks of festivals and theaters to present my pieces, here I was able to build my own audience by bypassing traditional dissemination venues.

Finally, logo-somatic freedom transcends classical boundaries between language and body, between artist and audience, and between human and technology. It flourishes uniquely in each work, but they all share an essential element: the recognition of 'other livings' as catalysts for this freedom. Whether through spoken dance, participative performance, or connective art, these works illustrate how the encounter with 'other livings' nurtures and enriches logo-somatic freedom, thus paving the way for new artistic expressions and new ways of being together in the contemporary world. It is in this encounter with 'other livings' that this freedom finds its breath, renews itself, and evolves, shaping the future of artistic expression—the living.

1.   *Chairs Mots* was performed in Paris at the International Scientific Colloquium on Pragmatism 'Performing Lives' (2015); at the CUTLOG Contemporary Art Fair; and for *Jeune Création* at Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery in Pantin. You can view a trailer online at vimeo.com/161065776.

2.   *Diaphoner* premiered in 2020 at the International Performers Meeting at the Sopot State Art Gallery, Sopot, Poland.

3.   *#DanseAvecLesMots* consisted of 51 live streams on Facebook during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. They are archived on my Youtube channel at youtube.com/playlist?list=PLThg4vEdi_iT0MettGxA_iq6qOxdDmQcn.

4.   In art, poïetics refers to the study of the creative processes and the relationship between the author and the work of art. The term 'poïetic' emphasizes the act of creation and the transformative nature of artistic expression. In 1937, Paul Valéry discussed poïetics in his first lecture of the course on poetics at the Collège de France. René Passeron (1977) also explored poïetics as a specific science of art in his work 'La poïétique comme science spécifique de l'art.'

5.   The idea of considering language as a form of life is not new. Charles Darwin himself drew

an intriguing parallel between the evolution of species and that of languages. In his work 'The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex,' he noted that 'languages, like organic beings, can be classed in groups subordinate to groups; and they can be classed naturally according to their affinities, or artificially by other characters' (Darwin 1891: 96). Indeed, one can observe that languages evolve over time and across territories, interact with each other through different cultures, and sometimes even die out, overshadowed by dominant languages.

6. I have already offered some speculative suggestions on these ideas in an article written in a collaborative duet with a Ukrainian psychoanalyst: see Reshe and Vlassov 2022.

7. www.facebook.com/anatoli.vlassov

8. For example, one of these individuals, named Muriel Roland, who lives in France, generates a substantial number of poetic texts that she posts in the chat while other spectators communicate with me solely through their words. Another person, Na Jak, residing in Switzerland, draws in front of her computer screen where my live performance is being broadcast. Her drawing improvises simultaneously with and is based on my phonesia, as well as in relation to words and texts posted in the chat. A third person, Miklos Legrady, who lives in Canada, captures screenshots of my live performances and creates a kind of graphic collage performance. Two different composers, Dmitri Kourliandski, lived in Russia and now in Paris, and Auguste Dard, residing in France, remix the sound of my live performances into musical compositions. Kourliandski transforms the sound of my live performances by manipulating various parameters (temporal, spatial, pitch, volume), while Dard combines my vocalizations with prerecorded voices of individuals engaged in sexual activity. Finally, another person, Josef Ka, who lives in Finland, remixes not only the sounds but also the video images of my live performances, incorporating them into her own video creations that she subsequently shares on Facebook. She eventually conducts her own live performance simultaneously with mine, projecting my performance onto the wall as a backdrop for her own performance. In this way, she interacts live with my phonesia while also being in a performative broadcast on her personal account.

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Autoethnographic Reflections on One's Own Imperialism

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The essay mixes the genre of autoethnographic reflections with an attempt to conceptualize the challenge that members of the Russian academic community in exile are facing on both individual and collective levels. It frames the questions of responsibility, guilt, and identity transformation, and traces the evolution of my personal responses to them as an attempt to document and conceptualize the unavoidable shift in the research field, agenda, positionality, and methods that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought to Slavic/area studies.

The war in Ukraine transcends mere physical conflict; it is a battle of narratives, spatial histories, and concepts. It brings into question the origins of the modern state, the legal rights of modern governmentality, and the history and geography of Western modernity. This struggle involves collective and personal imperialism, post-colonial activism, and a reevaluation of the modern state. As it enters its third year, the war illuminates the fissures where this violent tragedy originates. Endless discussions in the media, on social media, and at academic conferences examine the Russian state as the system which has produced this violence, leading to the wars in what we used to call 'the former Soviet space'; the knowledge production that justifies those wars and violence; and the societal constellations which have made it grow to an almost unstoppable extent. The questions of responsibility, personal and collective; grief, personal and collective; as well as actions, personal and collective, which led to the catastrophe, are yet to be named, conceptualized, and, hopefully soon, historicized. It would be an understatement to say that the war has impacted academic knowledge production at the levels of research ethics and relationship to the overall research agenda in former Slavic Studies as well as institutional connections and relationships. These long-awaited changes' rapid infusion into the research field is intensified by the private conversations and reflections that are dividing what remains of Russian civil society both inside and outside Russia.

This essay lies at the intersection of discussions on the essence and routes of Russian neo-imperialism, personal and collective responsibility and guilt, and how these perform themselves, especially in circles of the new Russian emigration. The methodology, or, better to say, the approach, that is at the core of this essay is self-ethnographic. As I find it unproductive, provoking, and unethical to produce another round of discussions on

'good' and 'bad' Russians, I instead turn my gaze onto myself. Here, I hope to start revealing the long and still ongoing process of deep transformation and reflection, personal as well as professional, that has come over me, a researcher of Russian origin working in Western academia who used to center her own career on Russia. Taking full responsibility for the less-than-ideal timing of this essay and for a variety of weak points in my logic and argumentation, I nonetheless find it important to turn my own gaze on my work, identity, and actions in an attempt to find the way to proceed.

I was never trained as an ethnographer, but, working in the bordering academic field of political and cultural geography, I learned the defining importance of 'the field' as a place where you do your research and collect the data, and the mechanics of self-reflexivity necessitated by it. The last decades, though, have radically changed the modernist understanding of the 'field,' influenced by a wide spectrum of online and offline research practices and the decolonizing of ethnography as scientific enquiry.

In modernity, the physical space between the 'field' and the 'home base' was crucial (as in the classic imperial-colonial relationships) and functioned as part of the colonial mode of knowledge production. Western white men produced academic knowledge about various 'others,' the only knowledge accepted as rational by Western modernity. The researchers' belonging to a 'more progressive' society situated far away produced an inequality of power (Walsh 1998). Today, the physical distance between the researcher and their subject has decreased, provoking a new round of discussions on postcolonial ethnographic methodology. The physical space between the 'field' and the 'home base' in classic colonial ethnographic knowledge production has transformed into a conceptual space between the researcher and the subject of their study; the source of power shifts from physical distance to conceptual space. Whatever strategy one chooses to minimize this physical distance and to reshape the power balance in this knowledge production relationship in order to be more inclusive of local knowledge systems, agendas, and perspectives, the conceptual distance is pre-defined at the level of the academic system. This space, however, is also intertwined with the questions of the researcher's identity and origin, and their unbalanced power to represent the Other gained by belonging to a particular academic system.

This space starts with the question of voice, its timeliness, and the appropriation of those voices by the researcher. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine this space between the researcher and their subject or, more generally, between one with the privilege of the voice and those to whom this voice belongs, became heavily emotionally charged. In other words, the self-identity and positionality of those who have the power to represent others define the conceptual space and are inseparable from those representations. In some cases, the necessity of conceptualizing this space pushes the researcher forward; in other cases, it just intertwines with it.

In my case, the need to identify myself, to locate myself on the

spectrum of various positions in a dramatically changed world, has set my research agenda. I have been working on Russia for more than fifteen years; moreover, I worked *in* Russia for more than fifteen years, mostly in hard-to-reach areas of the Russian Arctic.

The ongoing war has significantly changed my research interests and focus. I have started to look at, first, the geographical narratives developed in Russia to support the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and, second, the new waves of Russian emigration. The latter interest was provoked by my glaring feeling of not belonging among recent émigré circles and my conscious strategies of avoiding any possible reproduction of Moscow and Russian networks, spaces, and personal connections. If we come back to the notion of ethnographic distance and the classic process of colonial ethnographic *othering*, I would phrase my question as follows: why I am turning my former colleagues and friends into research objects, consciously avoiding reproducing familiar social and professional connections? Why do I bother them, and which distance (physical or conceptual) am I widening to potentially put myself in the position of a researcher?

This uncertainty in the field of identity and belonging is not new to me. There have been times when I put a lot of conscious effort into maintaining a lifestyle between two countries. Back then, I could not understand that this was a huge privilege, and not only a financial one. But such 'normal' pre-COVID mobilities have been forever lost. I lived in France—and went back to Russia; I studied and worked in the United Kingdom—and did work in Russia. This lifestyle stretched beyond simple traveling back and forth, as I had been working in Russia, in the Russian Arctic, Siberia, and the Far East for years. Living in two countries and engaging with multiple places is a privilege that comes with the responsibility of maintaining relationships and a feeling of belonging when you are elsewhere.

This *feeling* of belonging is linked to an inner feeling of being surrounded and understood by people with shared values (rather than being merely tolerated by them) that creates a certain basis for one's identities. I was 'a Muscovite' during my fieldwork in Russian regions, 'French' in the UK, and, most often, 'Scandinavian' whilst living in France, but these artificial constructions imposed by others' cultural and societal expectations had little to do with how I felt. I developed courses, implemented them in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and facilitated scientific and art cooperation between different countries and regions. I went to protests and volunteered for human-rights NGOs. That is who I was. My role was clear (at least to me), and navigating 'the field'—or the distance between my identity and the field—was a task to be done within the existing academic status quo. Now, when I look back, I have tons of issues with this status quo and my lack of a critical approach towards it.

In May 2022, I made the following note in my diary:

> 'I am boarding my Ryanair flight from Germany to Greece for the summer holidays with my daughter, as any other European middle-class family. Who am I, a 35-year-old "other white" female who used to have lofty goals and now is just happy because she secured a stable job in a project that she doesn't enjoy that much in Europe?'

At that point, I did not have an answer to this question. It came to me several months later. My drift from the place-based national modernist identity construction into which I was born to a post-modernist 'new nomadic' self-identity as an international postdoctoral researcher was taking place against the backdrop of Putin's regime becoming increasingly authoritarian. Wording an answer to the 'Where do you come from?' question and then learning how to speak up from the point of this newly developed identity were aborted with the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. It took me months to land in this search and understand that I was first and foremost Russian. I am not a researcher *on* Russia anymore because, as many others, I had to change my area of expertise and started to contribute to the creation of knowledge on and increase of Western interest towards other former Soviet republics.

To embrace the responsibility of being a Russian has a very conscious ethical choice. I agree with Hannah Arendt's (2009) point on personal and collective responsibility, but I do not use her arguments to distance myself from Russia's regime and join the ranks of the 'good Russians.' Rather, I employ them to discern those parts of my Russian life where I felt I could have unconsciously, by my own arrogance, contributed to fascist Russian propaganda and its justification of the full-scale invasion. It took me several months to conceptualize what I meant by this beyond an ethical and moral choice.

I was raised in a system of mixed holidays that do not reflect any particular confession. Our family holiday calendar would mix Catholic Christmas, Slavic *Maslenitsa*, Catholic and Orthodox Easter, and the long May holidays between 1 May (Labor Day) and 9 May (Victory Day). Did I ever question this eclectic, strange mix of holidays? My family was very close to Soviet dissident circles, and I was raised to be strongly critical of the government. But during our family dinners, when we talked about the origins of state terror, did we ever touch upon the war in Chechnya or the civil wars in Georgia and Tajikistan in the 1990s? Did we express our protest loud enough when Tskhinvali was invaded in 2008? Did we ever talk about the rights of the peoples of the North, and how they are constantly violated? I am glad that there are people who can answer *yes* to this question, but I am afraid that I am not one of them. Decades of unconscious imperiality and privilege, as well as the lack of security and self-confidence to be more politically active and socially conscious, are part of my Russian identity, and I am now putting a lot of effort into revealing them in myself. It is a long path that I am traveling together with my friends and colleagues, who help me hear/see, analyze, and eradicate my artificial superiority, imperiality, and arrogance. I am making mistakes along the way, and working in Georgia and Central Asia over the past couple of years has helped me to reveal and reflect on them.

I do not want this narrative to be seen as a new definition of the 'good Russians' and thus contribute to tearing apart Russians in exile. The battle over who is the true Russian is not my battle. Here, I am rather trying to conceptualize what parts of my upbringing and ignorance could

have led to the unconscious absence of an articulated critical political position towards the development of neo-imperialism in Russia. I want to understand what constitutes my responsibility in this regard, how this responsibility is divided between my professional and personal selves, and in what ways they feed each other. I am afraid that in this moment of professional and personal re-evaluation, I am struggling to separate those in a healthy way. I do not have a ready-made recipe.

As a person, I try to learn from people around me when I am in cities where there are many Russian migrants: listen to the protests against Russians, learn languages, and approach the regional and local voices to which I failed to listen previously. And I am constantly slipping. On a train in Uzbekistan, during a conflict with locals, I switch to Russian and am annoyed that I am not understood.

As a researcher, I do pretty much the same, providing space for self-positionality and reflection in my work, and trying not to feed into the Western academic trend of hastily relocating fieldwork planned for Russia to the now-overcrowded South Caucasus and Central Asia, and taking a lot of time and space before I voice any thoughts or ideas.

Here, we come across the question of *voice*.

How does one speak today after they have realized that they are Russian? How can one develop a voice from this position? And what conscious actions can one take, aside from giving material aid to Ukraine? 'The good Russian voice now is silent,' a good Georgian friend of mine told me, and I could not agree more. I read stories of Russian emigrants who shifted from academic and cultural positions to completely different jobs where they do not have so much power and such a large audience—and I respect them for that. The silence here is a conscious absence.

But the problem with silence is that it twists history and memory, warps them, turns them out of shape (Etkind 2013), and scholarship on memory and trauma tells us that silencing is not a solution (Assmann 2011). The silence of an individual as a response to a traumatic experience leads to concealment; this has dire consequences, and even more so when it is produced and reproduced by a community, especially within an intellectual community. Silencing creates space that can be easily taken over—and the question is, By whom? By formerly suppressed voices and narratives from the South Caucasus or Central Asia, or by narratives of Russian propaganda? However, for a silence to be loud, one's voice must have some power and weight in the community, otherwise its silence remains unnoticed. I am not sure that I have enough weight for the absence of my voice to be heard. If I stay in the professional field of academia, *not doing* is not the right answer.

For me, the correct approach to academic silence consists in providing space for others to speak, rather than merely absenting oneself. While interviewing residents of Tbilisi last year, one of the questions I asked was whether Russians should speak out—against the war or Putin's regime— loudly (in other words, whether the Russian voice should be heard), or, on the contrary, whether they should remain silent. The spectrum of answers

I received was incredibly broad, and this question occupies professional discussions to this day. Is the origin of the voice more important than its substance? What level of engagement and cooperation is ethically enough to ensure that Russians do not impose their (research) agenda on Georgia? How can we counterbalance the increasing presence of Russians in Georgian societal, economic, and cultural life? The Russian voice has a long history of being heard, prioritized, and dominant over other voices in what we used to call the former Soviet space; even today, the voice of Russians in exile is fairly loud in comparison with the voices of those who are living through the ongoing war (first and foremost, Ukrainians), or those who have been living in the shadow of previous Russian invasions (as Georgia has, for example). This inequality goes back centuries and rests on deep economic and social inequalities in the post-Soviet space. To unpack them on a structural level, we need to engage with post-Soviet postcolonial debates, which I do at a later stage in this essay.

If we take a step back and switch from individual reflections to the response of Russian scholars in exile, how do we approach the ongoing absence of collective reflection and critical re-evaluation—on structural, institutional, and discursive levels—of pre-war academic knowledge production in Russia? The trauma of emigration, attempts to reproduce familiar networks and routines, and leaning on one's circle of friends are completely understandable. Silence and shock as individual responses are also comprehensible. However, the same actions appear different if done by professional academics instead of by a group of individuals. The reproduction of Russian academic institutions 'in exile' and the absence of a joint critical program of reflection is alarming. While many articles have been written on Putin's distortion of memory, history, and social processes, and while academics who stayed in Russia are cut off from the international intellectual community, academics in exile have failed to produce a solid alternative narrative under which to put our signatures.

Reclaiming my Russian identity should have probably left me feeling unity with and belonging among newly emigrated anti-regime Russians in exile. However, it has not. Quite the opposite: I have never felt so isolated and resentful about being part of emerging cultural, political, and social projects. The immediate reproduction of familiar circles, institutions, and networks is a very logical collective mode of behavior in immigrant circles. However, my gut reaction to the growing Russian émigré presence—with its reproduction of institutions, schools, social circles, practices, and never-ending tours of anti-war musicians and authors—is to see it as a threat on an emotional level and strategically hasty and ill-considered on a rational one.

Coming back to the question of voice and its positionality, most Russian voices that are developing right now outside Russia are marked by an anti-war position. The West had enough power to establish a ground rule for Russian citizens looking to leave Russia for the West: explicit opposition to the war. However, in some countries which have experiences of the

Soviet occupation, an explicit anti-war position is not enough. Georgians, for example, as I have shown, also require that Russians develop an explicit anti-imperial position, followed by an articulated and well-informed position on the occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

Research into Russian emigration is growing quite fast and is dominated by sociological approaches looking at emigrants' everyday strategies, adaptation, and political views. The angle on which I have decided is different: it centers around the impact of the Russian emigration on the receiving societies and *their* perception of the Russians. This is an improvement in that centering academic research on Russians in exile reproduces the long-time centering of 'Slavic' or 'post-Soviet' area studies on Russia. However, if we come back to the notion of ethnographic distance and the classic process of colonial ethnographic othering, what I thus do is turn my former colleagues and friends into objects of my research, consciously avoiding involvement in a reproduction of familiar social and professional connections. Why do I other them, and what is the position that I occupy by doing so? My reflections on this professional choice cannot be separated from my ongoing research.

The approach that I pursue originates from interviews that I started to conduct in Georgia for another project. When I was talking to various people in Tbilisi in the summer of 2022, all our conversations turned towards the topic of how drastic the impact of Russian emigration on Tbilisi had been and how it had torn apart the life of the city. Words like 'third occupation,' 'neo-imperialism,' and 'Russian arrogance' were used constantly, and I could not make sense of them at that point. That was perhaps the sincerest moment of academic and personal curiosity and enquiry that I had ever had in my career: I put a lot of genuine effort into attempts to hear, understand, and conceptualize the social resistance towards Russian presence in Georgia. So, trying to find my own place on the spectrum of post-war Russian identities, I chose to see what is perceived as imperial and arrogant in Russians by Georgians and to voice it. Does my research go beyond ethically correct curiosity, or am I seeking to appropriate the argumentation of my interviewers to distance myself from 'the Russians'?

Several periods of extended fieldwork in Tbilisi have shown me that the waves of Russian emigration in Tbilisi are dramatically reshaping the social and economic life in the city by enforcing (neo)imperial inequalities. The linguistic and physical dominance of Russians in Tbilisi triggers the national trauma of the Imperial and Soviet occupations; it also reenforces the perceived threat of a new Russian invasion. Differences in the political cultures of Russian and Georgian civil societies make Russian political activism invisible to Georgians, and Russian immigrants are therefore perceived as politically passive. Initiatives and projects launched and realized by Russians quite often serve the Russian bubbles and operate in the Russian language. Certainly, as already mentioned, it is a standard practice in immigrant circles to preserve old connections, practices,

language, and social capital.

However, what is different in the case of Russian emigrants in Georgia is that they come from a historically very privileged—and not fully acknowledged—position of power and imperial dominance. The aspect of Russian neo-imperialism that was of the most interest to me lay in the body language of Russians in Tbilisi. 'I always know if it is a Russian person walking down a street'; 'They occupy the whole street when they walk'; 'They are loud': these quotes from my interviews showed me that the problem of Russians in Georgia goes beyond differences in political cultures and the long history of un-self-aware imperialism. Russian (neo) imperialism in Georgia appears on the level of individual and collective actions, and on the level of corporeal dynamics. And who is to define what is (neo)imperialism if not those who suffered from several centuries of Russian and Soviet occupation?

This resistance towards growing Russian neo-imperialism started to feel personal, and I began to be more and more engaged. What am I doing? The convincing narrative which I tell myself is that I am using my Western academic privilege and my still-quite-loud Russian voice to represent the subaltern. That I exercise good academic practice with my Georgian colleagues by making their concerns about Russian (neo) imperialism in Georgia heard. But maybe I am just appropriating the convenient discourse of Georgian trauma to distance myself from Russians and from Russia's regime? Equally often, I am accused of being Russia-phobic by my Russian colleagues, and of repressing Georgian voices by speaking up 'for' Georgians who can speak up for themselves. Probably the truth is someone in between.

The twisted space between my identity, my research position, and my academic agenda fluctuates with my attempts to conceptualize the practice of self-decolonization but does not create a void, a demarcating line between 'good' and 'bad' Russians. Decolonization in my work starts with methods, ethics, and self-decolonization, which shrinks the conceptual space of the 'field' and probably assigns me the role of an activist. Otherwise, I feel like I would be continuing to impose decolonization on émigré circles from the outside, joining the crowds of academics who were forced to move from Russia to countries 'of the near abroad.' And while I am on the road to figuring out what layers of unconscious imperialism I possess, I can say for sure that decolonization stretches far beyond decentralizing Area Studies and learning other languages. 'Start with yourself' may sound banal, but it doesn't hurt to try.

If we scale back again and use this self-reflection as one of many, the questions that this essay poses concern both the issue of individual and collective responsibility, and the conscious uses of structural advantages that Russian scholars still have in comparison with scholars from other former Soviet republics for developing decentralized perspectives on the history, geography, and society of Russia, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union.

How do we facilitate discussion, dialogue, and joint knowledge production between subalterns, or between what we used to call 'peripheries' and 'the center,' and what role should Russian academics in exile play in these processes? These are the crucial questions that draw on the different aspects of positionality, ethics, activism, and self-reflection which have become an inseparable part of area studies research since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine created an immense crisis in the former Soviet space, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of displaced people. Turning one's gaze to individual choices and actions seems to be one of the few strategies that can shift one's perspective away from accusation and judgement towards the Other towards self-reflection and individual responsibility. Therefore, the closing remarks here only refer to myself, as a researcher and as an individual. As we enter the third year of the war, I feel that I am drifting through the processes I have outlined above and that my position as a researcher and as an individual is also developing. I do not think any more that Russian voices must universally keep silent, but neither do I agree that our main efforts should center around reproducing Russian networks, institutions, and spaces. I feel (and know through my research in Georgia) that the old, blindly reproduced lifestyles that were very often a survival strategy for Russians in the first two years of emigration must now become far more self-critical and less arrogant.

1. I use the word 'Russians' in this text to imply first and foremost Russian citizens rather than ethnic Russians. The discussion on the relation of 'Russian people' to 'Russian citizens,' and 'Russians' is necessary, though twisted and complicated. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, in this text I use the simplified and generalized notion of 'Russians,' being fully aware of the conceptual limitations of this approach.
2. When I fill in official forms about myself, 'other white' is the ethnic category I belong to.

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Russian Colonial Sickness and Decolonial Recovery: Revelations of Autotheoretical Practice

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Russian Colonial Sickness and Decolonial Recovery: Revelations of Autotheoretical Practice

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This autotheoretical essay explores self-decolonization as a personal, embodied process through my experience of displacement and chronic illness. Russia's full-scale invasion of and ongoing genocide in Ukraine have drawn the world's attention to the brutal history of Russian colonialism. The fact I was largely unfamiliar with this history blew a hole in the foundation of my scholarly expertise and sense of self. Amid long months of sickness at my family home in the US, I sought to exorcize imperial myths from and find decolonial truths in my knowledge and family story. Learning from the lived experiences of Ukrainians and discussions with my father on Ukrainian identity was transformative, demonstrating the pedagogical power of listening to voices erased by colonialism.

In June 2014 I traveled with a group of academics from the UK to St. Petersburg to participate in the conference Russia—UK: Five Centuries of Cultural Relations.[1] The event organizers did their utmost to showcase Russian culture for foreign visitors: the Deputy Minister of Culture officially opened the event in the Hermitage theater, conference panels were held in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and the final evening featured an outdoor concert, which was dramatically staged at the bottom of the chessboard staircase at Peterhof and closed with turning on the gold Samson fountain—out of season—just for us. This conference occurred in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Crimea and Donbas and likely became part of a broader effort to smooth over tensions in Russia—UK relations. I remember a few colleagues (British and some Russian) mentioned they had been furiously arguing with Russian academics who were not outraged that their country had just taken part of a sovereign nation and declared it theirs. I listened to these discussions, understood it was wrong, but didn't dwell on it: I loved Russian culture and was swept up in the fanfare, and, informed by my Russocentric academic knowledge and my own family background, I believed the insidious colonialist lie that Russia and Ukraine were closely intertwined. On the morning of my departure, I was violently sick from the worst food poisoning I had ever experienced and barely made my flight. As I look back now in revulsion and shame at my failure to question and willingness to be part of an event celebrating Russia amid its invasion of Ukraine, I wonder if my body was trying to tell me something: this pomp and propaganda were rotten and needed to be purged from my system.

After Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I was long overdue for 'a merciless purging of the grand imperial myths' (Tlostanova

2018: 128) through decolonization—a process urgently required more broadly in the academic and public discourse on Russia in the West.[2] The fact that Russia's long brutal history of empire and colonialism, of which the ongoing genocide in Ukraine is the latest phase, was largely unfamiliar to me revealed just how little I knew about the country I was supposedly an expert on and how catastrophically existing systems of knowledge about Russia in the West have failed. A recent study of course offerings in US universities (Gorodnichenko, Sologub, and Deryugina 2023), which are obscenely dominated by Russia, is indicative of a bigger problem: Western public and scholarly discussions of Russia and the Soviet Union have generally privileged Russian voices over those of its formerly and currently colonized nations. This narrow epistemological framework not only problematically reduces an enormous chunk of the world—areas as diverse as Siberia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia—to the perspective of a white, ethnic Russian, Russian Orthodox, and Russian-speaking population in the metropoles of Moscow and St. Petersburg but also gives credence to the imperial narrative that Russia is a 'great' power that is entitled to control those lands. This kind of thinking conceals the fact that Russia has silenced, hidden, and erased indigenous cultures and histories through colonial mechanisms of exploitation, appropriation, genocide, and ecocide for hundreds of years.

Since 2022 I have been among the scholars (Leigh 2022) who have had to confront our own role in perpetuating imperial myths and 'turning a blind eye to' Russian colonialism for so long (Radynski 2023). While decolonial scholars such as Madina Tlostanova (2020; 2018) and experts on countries such as Ukraine have advanced discussions of marginalized voices, misconceptions still pervade scholarship and media in the West, with even leading decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo defending Russia's invasion and denying agency to Ukraine (Durdiyeva 2023).

The fact that the country that I had devoted my career to and lived in is and always was a genocidal colonial empire[3] raised urgent questions as a scholar and human that I could not explore within the boundaries of my field of art history or traditional academic writing. As an 'art of the present,' autotheory offers potential for historians to respond to contemporary crises and 'anchor scholarship [and pedagogy] in activism, community engagement, and everyday life as sites of meaning-making' (Brostoff and Fournier 2021: 495, 498). A productive tool for self-decolonization, autotheory 'unsettles Eurocentric [or Russocentric] ways of knowing' (Brostoff and Fournier 2021: 492) and gives space to scrutinize and take accountability for long-held assumptions and probe the ways in which personal and academic lives can inform and misinform each other.

A US citizen with British cultural ties and Ukrainian and Russian heritage, I had been living in Moscow for less than a year before leaving soon after the 2022 invasion. My dislocation from a recently established home to life in limbo without fixed abode has occurred amid chronic illness—a different type of dislocation. The state of free-fall I have felt in my loss of home and seemingly endless sickness, however, has led to sensations of openness and receptivity. This emotional and intellectual letting-go has powered my process

of self-decolonization, which involves a displacement from (self-)knowledge/ history that seemed fixed and a disruption of ableist, imperialist power structures. Spending long months of convalescence at my family home in the US has also facilitated a cross-generational dialogue on suppressed Ukrainian identity with my father, who was born in Ukraine in 1941 and arrived as a refugee in New York in 1947. Listening to the lived experiences of Ukrainian journalists, artists, and activists has been transformative for my decolonial practice and enabled me to uncover colonial mythmaking and erasure within my own family. Decolonizing the self involves 'painful work asking for ruthless self-criticism' and wrestling with personal and collective memory and their 'restless ghosts' (Tlostanova 2018: 119—20). I have spent the past year doing just that.

Displacement

As an affective and bodily experience that un-fixes one's position from a previous state, displacement kickstarted my practice of self-decolonization. Looking back now, my departure from Russia felt like an exodus. From the Greek 'ex' for 'out' and 'odos' for path or road, exodus is 'the road out'—a departure that enables liberation, a going-out-of that does not necessarily involve landing anywhere. After a year of immersing myself in Russian life and language and work in a Russian institution, this country I thought I knew intimately began a campaign of annihilation in Ukraine. While every new report of violence was a shock, when Russian missiles made Kharkiv into the same grey landscape of destruction my father was born into in World War II, it was time to go. On 3 March, I took the first step out of and away from Russia, and my physical displacement served as a decolonial 'entry point,' delinking me from previous ways of knowing to move toward a new 'political, ethical, and epistemic positioning' (Tlostanova 2020: 165). The foundations upon which I had built my knowledge about Russian culture—and what I had understood that category to mean—were no longer reliable, throwing me into a period of epistemic doubt. The uncertainty and discomfort I felt from my displacement helped me accept, explore, and welcome this state of not-knowing and seek decolonial truths.

When I no longer called Russia home and could view it from the outside, I saw just how much my Russocentric perspective had blinded me. I saw Russia's coloniality—the 'dark side' of its grand historical narrative and what it excluded and silenced. My scholarship and pedagogy had been focused almost solely on artistic developments in Moscow and St. Petersburg or abroad in the diaspora. The only real insight I had into Russia's imperial history was through the artist Vasily Vereshchagin, who highlighted Russian colonial violence in Central Asia but nonetheless remained committed to its 'civilizing mission.'

After arriving in the UK in March 2022, I could not stop thinking about an exhibition I had seen at the State Historical Museum in Moscow a few months before I left Russia. *Russian Empire* [*Rossiiskaia imperiia*] celebrated the 300th anniversary of Peter I's establishment of the imperial Russian state (1721—1917). In a triumphalist linear narrative from Peter I to Nicholas II, the display showcased the empire's splendor through crowns and regalia and its vastness through maps

and statistics, boasting it was 'one of the largest states that ever existed in history.' While the empire was *rossiiskaia*—'Russian' in a broad geographical and civic sense—the centralized state and monarch acted as if it were just *russkaia* (Weeks 195), the signifier for ethnic Russians and their language, culture, and religion, and still the most common word for 'Russian' today.[4] In Russian [*russkii*] great-power chauvinism—a term first used by Vladimir Lenin to condemn the Russian imperial nationalism of Joseph Stalin—Russia's 'greatness' justifies its superiority and rule over less 'civilized,' non-Russian people. The exhibition claimed the empire 'united different peoples and territories' and contained 'two hundred nationalities,' yet none was represented or named. This historical vision of Russia corresponds directly with the Kremlin's imperial rhetoric today (Pynnöniemi 2019). The notion that the Russian Federation [*Rossiiskaia Federatsiia*], in the words of one of the main architects of Putinism, Vladislav Surkov, is a 'great and growing community of nations that gathers lands'—a phrase that harkens back to the violent conquests of the tsars—is used to legitimize its expansionist aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighboring countries.

While I was certainly disturbed by this exhibition at the time—its location right across from the Kremlin felt especially unnerving and ominous—I was horrified reflecting on it in spring of 2022. The genocide in Bucha and Irpin broadcast to the world how Russia enforced its ethnonationalist superiority and entitlement through colonial violence. As Russian soldiers were murdering, raping, and torturing their way through Ukraine, I felt sick remembering a video screen display at the exhibition. It was an animated map showing the geographical area of each tsar's conquests in splotches of red, which, amid a background of rousing classical music, spread out farther across the continent over time. This proud visualization of Russia's long historical tradition of invasion, exploitation, and genocide was subsumed under the banners of 'expansion,' 'unification,' and 'modernization.' While the existence of indigenous people was acknowledged as a number or spot on a map, their lived experience had been erased. Paintings of white peasants were the only representations of 'the people.' The process of cherry-picking what is 'heroic' or 'positive' out of Russia's colonial past and casting the rest into oblivion forges what Sergei Abashin (2020) calls 'un-colonial' [*nikolonial'nyi*] history. This denial of the past in the present—the coloniality of time (Vàzquez 2018: 250–51)—acts as a mechanism to ensure the Russian 'greatness' narrative's control over the representation of reality. In this space non-Russian people, languages, and cultures and their 'uncomfortable' histories are marginalized or whitewashed out of existence.

My specialism in 'Russian art' [*russkoe iskusstvo*] was now a bold-faced lie. I had used umbrella terms like 'Russian art,' 'Russian avant-garde,' and 'the national school of Russian painting,' which were not only completely inaccurate but also contributed to the myth of Russian 'greatness' that lays claim to and speaks for non-Russian cultures. The legacies of artists as important as Kazymyr Malevych (Figure 1), whose Ukrainianness was formative for and integral to his life and work, are thus

maligned and misrepresented. How could I work on my monograph on 'Russian art' when Russia was trying to wipe Ukrainian art from existence? Russia destroyed the house-museums of artists Arkhyp Kuindzhi and Polina Raiko, looted art, artefacts, and books, including over 10,000 artworks systematically pillaged from the Kherson Art Museum (Nemtsova 2023), damaged the Odesa Fine Arts Museum in a missile strike, and kidnapped and threatened museum workers to make them reveal where collections were hidden (Gettleman and Chubko 2022). This cultural genocide made the un-Russianness of artists previously labeled and appropriated as 'Russian' violently clear.

The Potential of Chronic Illness

In May 2022 I contracted COVID-19 for the second time, and the chronic fatigue I had struggled with for two years became worse than ever before. This shift coincided with my return to my family home in the US, and I spent months barely able to get out of bed. Everyday activities like taking a shower, walking up a staircase, or texting a friend were nearly impossible. As Russia continuously bombed and killed Ukrainians, as colleagues organized seminar series on Zoom and exchanged emails about decolonization and actions to take, as friends did extraordinary work on the ground to help Ukrainians, I felt useless. What could I do apart from raise my 'sick woman fist' (Hedva 2020a) in solidarity? I had to decolonize my knowledge and myself, but how could I begin the process of unlearning and relearning amid physical/cognitive impairment and incapacitation?

It turned out that that these were just the right conditions for self-decolonization. Decoloniality 'reaches out to those who have been disdained, made invisible, or dispensable' and causes one 'to understand suffering of the oppressed' (Vàzquez 2012: 243). Seen as weak and fragile, the sick body does not fit into universal notions of the 'normal,' making it, as Johanna Hedva (2020a) outlines in 'Sick Woman Theory,' 'sensitive, reactive to regimes of oppression' and to those who are 'culturally illegitimate and politically invisible.' While illness is typically associated with inaction and passivity (Hedva 2020b), artists and scholars (Sharma, Sainte-Marie, Fournier 2017) have long recognized its experiential potential and that of rest and self-care. Self-care, as Black queer feminist poet Audre Lorde (1988) first formulated, is 'an act of political warfare'—a tool of resistance to imperialist, patriarchal, and racial hegemonies (Steinvorth 2023). In being confined to one room unseen and unknown to the outside world, the sick body can also marshal silence as a form of resistance (Santos 2022; Dogadaeva and Zavadski 2023) and an amplification of marginalized voices.

In learning amid chronic pain and physical vulnerability, my self-pedagogy became an emotional, embodied experience. An insular life offered space to correct the vast sea of things I didn't know and cultivate, as Oksana Dudko (2023: 180) proposes to scholars in Russian Studies, 'genuine academic curiosity' about previously neglected regions and people. I have learned more

about Russia and my own family history in the past year than ever before through reading and listening to the voices of the currently and formerly colonized, especially their Instagram posts, podcasts, memes, and Twitter threads. No longer belonging to an academic institution, I was free to think and learn outside of academic disciplines and schools of thought—a situation that I acknowledge was only possible from an economically privileged position not afforded to others.

With an illness where it 'costs you to do anything' (Hedva 2020a), learning is slow but somehow feels more precious. I could pause and reflect on glittering facts like 'at the end of the nineteenth century the tsar ruled over more Muslim subjects than the Ottoman Sultan' (Leigh and Taroutina 2023: 1). No longer restricted to my research area of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I familiarized myself with the crimes of the Soviet period and was shook by the suppression of independence movements after the Revolution of 1917 and forced deportations of whole populations of non-Russian national groups to Siberia and Central Asia after the Second World War.[5] The Crimean People's Republic, which granted women the right to vote for the first time in the Muslim world, lasted only a month before the Bolsheviks seized control in 1918, and in 1941 between 187,000 and 191,000 Crimean Tatars were deported to 45-year exile (Williams 2016: 62, 101) and still face immense Russian persecution today (Musaeva 2023).

Weak and in pain, burning from inflammation, I could not look away. In this state, every new bit of information, every fact, staggers, floors, hits harder; you feel it reverberate and clang throughout the body so loudly that it leaves a permanent echo behind. I took off the rose-tinted glasses and saw Russia's 'great' landscape of human and cultural erasure: the abolishment of the Buryat language's Mongolian script and imposition of Cyrillic in the late 1930s; sickening massacres led by Grigory Zass in the Circassian genocide in the nineteenth century; and the execution of Ukrainian artist Mikhailo Boichuk and his circle in the purges in 1937. Typically dismissed in art historical discussions of his work, Malevych's late series of peasant paintings (Figure 1) was a powerful, subtle visualization of the horrors of the Holodomor genocide (Great Famine) in Ukraine and the artist's own arrest and imprisonment in 1930.[6]

This history hurts and it should. Decolonization is uncomfortable and 'hard, unsettling work' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). In long-term illness you learn to embrace the unresolved and show curiosity about discomfort because you live with it every day. As Pema Chödron argues (2013), chronic illness offers 'the death of old stuck patterns,' 'makes way for something new to be born,' and 'a hidden doorway to freedom when there is no way out.' Like a snake shedding its skin, I felt a decolonial push to leave the dominant narrative I'd been taught behind and recognize the alternatives and hope outside of it (Vàzquez 2012: 243). The joy of letting go of Russian culture in a moment when I hated it was exhilarating, and I felt slightly furious about how much I had been missing out on: having never liked Russian literature—much to the chagrin of its many enthusiasts—I tore

through novels by Ukrainian writers, and the new stunning exhibition catalogue *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900—1930s* (Akinsha 2023) was a welcome companion in my sickbed. I echoed the sentiments of the futurist artists and poets in their 1912 manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (Burliuk et al. 1912/1988: 51): 'The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics. Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.'

Decolonial Power

Despite how much I wanted to learn, when my illness was at its worst, reading and even watching TV required too much cognitive focus. Due to light and noise sensitivity and crushing fatigue, I spent months lying down in a dark quiet room. The only way I could absorb knowledge was to listen. As Rolando Vàzquez (2012: 248) outlines, listening is a powerful tool of decolonial critique: the system of modernity 'holds the monopoly of speaking', and listening 'opens... humbles... builds understanding' that intends 'to bridge the colonial difference,' presenting 'a challenge to listen to those who have been disavowed and silenced.' Amid Russia's ongoing genocide and terrorist attacks, listening to Ukrainian voices has been crucial and urgent, especially given the tendency of academics in the West (including me before 2022) to view Ukraine through a Russian lens and ignore the voices of Ukrainian scholars (Kurylo 2023: 3) as part of a 'long-standing practice of casting Ukrainians as objects rather than subjects of their history' (Finnin 2013). This 'epistemic injustice' (Dudko 2023: 181), which is also prevalent in Western media, has led to the spread of dangerous disinformation about Ukraine, in which false Kremlin narratives such as the claim that Ukraine and Russia are brotherly nations and 'one people' (Putin 2021)[7] can gain traction.

An initiative launched in March 2022 by Ukrainian activist Valeriia Voshchevska and journalist Maksym Eristavi,[8] the *Ukrainian Spaces* podcast series has demonstrated the pedagogical power of listening to lived experiences of colonialism, bringing 'what has been relegated to oblivion' (Vàzquez 2018: 243) into the light and facilitating my own decolonial awakening. In over 60 episodes, all in English, they have featured different Ukrainian speakers, including Crimean Tatar, Jewish, and Romani Ukrainians and Ukrainians of color, on topics such as language, literature, cuisine, queer pride, feminism, pets, and diversity, and have built a global decolonial hive mind in solidarity with Kyrgyz, Qazaq, South Sudanese, and Taiwanese guests. Simply listening to their tone of voice and resonance in speaking about the violence of the invaders and fears for family, friends, and pets created a powerful, embodied sense of the impact of colonialism and revealed the knowledge that emotion, which is typically undervalued in academic research, can impart. With episodes entitled 'Decolonizing Stupid Things You Say About Ukraine' and 'Russian Colonialism in Ukraine, Explained,' the speakers aimed to educate listeners

as well as air their own frustrations with Westsplaining and gaslighting.[9] As someone with an invisible illness—a category of disability often subject to systemic disbelief—I felt keen empathy.

The podcast served as a safe space for Ukrainians to explore self-decolonization and reconnect with their Ukrainian identity as part of a community: speaking to each other enabled them to connect the dots and work out all the ways in which Russian colonialism and genocide affected multiple generations of Ukrainians. As Eristavi put it, rediscovering roots and history 'even within a family' is 'an everyday act of investigative journalism because a lot of truths and a lot of facts were concealed, hidden, erased throughout the decades and the centuries. And this does not make the job of discovering your identity easy' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 5 July 2022).

As I lay there in the dark, I listened to their stories and found that they were mine. Their grandparents, the names of family members, the things they did and did not know, the questions silenced and unanswered. I frantically scribbled down notes, often having to listen to the same few sentences over and over, rallying my sluggish sick body and mind to connect the dots and conduct my own 'investigative journalism.' My lack of understanding of Russian colonialism had prevented me from seeing its impact on my own family, and each episode prompted me to ask new questions and make connections. Over a long period of self-reflection, I developed a practice of listening that was subversive and dialogic; while unable to move physically I welcomed the movement of ways of thinking about Russia that had been deeply imbedded in me—seismic shifts that blow a huge hole in the foundation of my scholarly expertise and sense of self.

Alongside *Ukrainian Spaces*, I also listened to my father rediscover his own Ukrainian voice. For my father, the February 2022 invasion cleared the cobwebs away: he had spent 80 years of his life being told he was something that he wasn't. He was born in Kharkiv in 1941 and arrived as a displaced person to New York at age 6 along with my grandmother and his brother. He quickly learned English and became American. He never dwelled on nor was interested in his identity and spoke basic Russian at home, not learning how to read or write it. While he knew his father whom he had never met was Ukrainian, his mother told everyone they were Russian. The Ukrainianness in the family was downplayed, and Russian was an easier identity to explain in America; the fact that Westerners have generally tended to see Russians and Ukrainians as 'interchangeable' still creates a feeling of 'disconnect' for Ukrainians in the diaspora today (Stashsko 2022). I had grown up with the sense that we were both Russian and Ukrainian, but our Ukrainianness was not something to be proud of, perhaps a bit embarrassing, to be said in a stage whisper. As the *Ukrainian Spaces* episode 'How Russians made Ukrainians Hate Themselves' (5 July 2022) explores, this sense of shame was part of an inferiority complex conditioned by Russian colonialism. In the words of guest Sasha Boychenko, 'it's not only that [our] history and identity have been systematically erased, but they've also been altered... they've been messed with.'

Free of the shame surrounding Ukrainianness and the enforcement of Russian identity from my grandmother, who died years ago, my father began to explore what had been altered and what had survived in the face of genocide. Over many conversations during my long period at home, I shared what I had been learning, and we slowly unpacked and sorted through his memories, understanding and identifying the distinctly Ukrainian features of his life. He began speaking about his first few years in New York, during which time his Ukrainian paternal grandparents had also arrived and became part of the Ukrainian diaspora community. The visceral, sensory memories of a child began to surface: he remembered going with his grandfather to a Ukrainian Orthodox church and celebrating Easter, describing richly colored *pysanky* Easter eggs and a spread of desserts made by his grandmother Dusya. When I heard on *Ukrainian Spaces* that Russians mock Ukrainians for eating salo—slabs of fatback—he recalled it with ease. The family borshch recipe, too, came from Dusya, not from my grandmother who had appropriated it as 'Russian.'

Until 2022, I had heard virtually nothing about these grandparents whom he had only known for a brief span of time. My grandmother had remarried, and when her new husband (who was Polish) arrived in New York, she ceased contact with her in-laws, who had moved to a different state. I couldn't imagine how painful it would have been to miraculously find your grandchildren in America after the war and then be pushed out of their lives, and how heartbreaking for my father to be cut off from his grandparents as well as his cultural roots. His immediate family's Ukrainian identity, too, has become clearer, especially after some linguistic discoveries.

Years ago, when I began traveling to Russia, I had realized my grandmother spoke Russian with a strong Ukrainian accent. Amid decolonial discussions about generations of Ukrainians being conditioned to believe their language was uneducated and inferior to Russian, I began learning Ukrainian on Duolingo and saw just how different it was. I was livid at myself for believing the common assumption in the West that the two languages are nearly interchangeable when it is so easily corrected simply by listening to Ukrainians. Including my father: as I read out some basic Ukrainian words, we were both surprised that he recognized a few amid his limited Russian vernacular. A few days later he came rushing down the stairs, lit up with glee after a phone call with his cousin, with whom he had been sifting through family memories, myths, and lies, revealed they had used Russian and Ukrainian words concurrently while growing up. Like me, he had assumed they were similar, but that was because he knew them both; Ukrainian had been appropriated as 'Russian' his entire life. As I pictured two octogenarians saying the words 'onion' (*tsybulia* in Ukrainian/ *luk* in Russian), 'beets' (*buriak/svekla*), and 'flower' (*kvitka/tsvetok*) aloud and finding all this meaning in them, I thought, these are the things that slip through the cracks of coloniality: food names, pysanky, borshch—'the inadvertent insight[s] to make the puzzle pieces fall into place' (Zabuzhko

2021: 33) and deny assimilation and erasure.

While I felt fierce joy for my father that his stubborn kernel of Ukrainianness had persisted, my self-decolonization has felt more complicated. Extremely close with my grandmother, I was proud to be the only grandchild to have learnt Russian and share her love of Russian culture. I had built an entire career on it and a sense of belonging to Russia, which enabled me to forge close relationships with Russian relatives and informed my decision to move there. She always said Russia is 'the best' and being Russian makes you strong; but now being Russian makes me feel sick. To work through my complicity and guilt, I needed to deconstruct her zeal for a country she had only been to once when she was in her 80s, as both a grandchild and a historian with a new decolonial toolbox.

Oksana Zabuzhko's (2012: 17) remark that 'Ukrainian families changed faiths, languages, and national flags in practically every generation... like addicts going through needles' felt fitting for my grandmother, who was a survivalist with chameleon-like tendencies. She became what she had to in a world in which the language you spoke and what ethnicity or religion you claimed could get you killed, saved, or deported. Armed with a lexicon of Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and German, she managed to survive a harrowing journey with her children from Kharkiv to a displacement camp in Germany and then to the US. Lying was so ingrained in her as a survival strategy that I grew up hearing a constantly shifting narrative of events that bordered on both comedy and tragedy. Some family members who were said to be dead were in fact alive, and I once overhead her proudly telling a stranger that she had been born in Moscow. I have no doubt if she were alive now, she would boast about being born in Odesa. Which she, indeed, was, in 1919, before moving to Kharkiv in her childhood.

During her teenage years to her early twenties, Ukraine became 'the most dangerous place in the world' (Snyder 2015: 699): my grandmother lived through the purges of the 1930s, which decimated the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the Holodomor (Great Famine) genocide, and World War II. In the 1920s she had learned Ukrainian at school as part of the Soviet policy celebrating non-Russian nationalities, but in the 1930s Stalin reversed this and implemented an aggressive policy of Russification of language and culture that, along with the intentional starvation of millions of Ukrainians through famine, sought to destroy the Ukrainian nation. Here I found the root of her insistence that Russia was 'the best': by the mid to late 1930s the rhetoric of great Russian chauvinism had entered official state discourse, which from then onwards emphasized the superiority of 'the great Russian [*russkii*] people', who were the 'first among equals' and leader of the Soviet 'family of nations' (Plokhy 2017: 255). While said to be 'equal,'[10] non-Russian nationalities such as Ukrainian were regarded as inferior and potentially treasonous.

Pathological fear creates pathological lies: Russianness was a shield my grandmother bore against the world, and any Ukrainianness was appropriated to it. In 'the colonization of the imaginary' (Quijano 2007: 168—69), the colonizer's culture and language are made 'seductive,'

rewarding the dominated for assimilation. As Voshchevka's grandmother Maria (Eristavi and Voshchevska 13 March 2023) wrote, 'We were taught to love someone else's made-up country and be ashamed of our own roots.' I then faced a moment in self-decolonization where, as Eristavi notes, 'you're not entirely even sure what is true, what is not, what was conditioned [by colonialism], what was real' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 23 December 2022). What words do I use now to tell a family story about her? My self-identifying-as-Russian but possibly repressed/suppressed Ukrainian grandmother? Her identity had been so important to me, but now I had to let go of the universalist idea that identities are singular or fixed things. The 'truth' I'd been searching for was that Russian colonialism and its cycles of genocide, along with the trauma of World War II, had annihilated any self she could have had. Reflecting upon this now, I cannot help but recall the eerie faceless figures that haunt Malevych's late work and appear spatially disconnected from the stark, flat background, alienating their empty bodies from the earth. But the intergenerational dialogue I continue to have with my Ukrainian father is part of a global 'awakening... about our roots... this awareness... is the sound of the [Russian] colonial empire cracking. And they're so scared this will spread' (Eristavi and Voshchevska 23 May 2022). And from my sickbed I will spread it with all the decolonial energy I can muster.

Nearly ten years ago I heard about a war and decided it didn't affect me. Now that has been proved wrong on so many levels. Beyond the ruptures in my personal and professional lives, the realization that the country I had championed is a ruthless colonizer and the country where my roots lie is an unbreakable defender of freedom and the dignity of life has changed my view of the world and understanding of my own role in it dramatically. Rather than discarding and swapping identities like a chameleon, my mixed(-up) American, British, Russian, and Ukrainian self must chart a new path forward, starting with acknowledging my complicity in Russia's colonial lies. Living with and continuing to explore my unresolved self-knowledge means I 'won't let [myself] off the hook' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 4) in what Janet Mawhinney calls a 'move to innocence.'[11] I advocate Georgy Mamedov's (2022: 126) emphasis on the Russian word for complicity, *souchastie*. *Souchastie* can be translated into two English words in social justice discourse: 'complicity'—the more negative sense of acknowledging one's own part in systemic and historical injustices—and 'accompliceship'—the positive sense of actively working with the oppressed towards concrete actions. Working to end Russian colonial violence and oppression involves confronting and taking responsibility for the Russian chauvinist attitudes that live within us and amplifying and standing with indigenous and/or non-Russian voices. The 'internal activism' (Tlostanova 2018: 21) of individual decolonization, then, can lead to solidarity and collective resistance. To be a decolonial warrior and accomplice is to recognize one's own position of safety and wellness and care for others: care forges a 'radical kinship' (Hedva 2020b). It is a way of connecting with one another that insists 'if only some of us are well, none of us are.' If we take that attitude, then Russia's cracking empire will fall, be held accountable for its past and present crimes, and repatriate all stolen land. Global care for bodies

and minds in a perpetual state of terror from invasion and genocide or facing everyday oppression—whether they are Ukrainian, Syrian, Bashqort, Chechen, or South Sudanese—will lead to liberation.

Acknowledgements

1. 2014 was officially designated the UK—Russia Year of Culture by the UK and Russian governments, and many cultural events and projects were organized in both countries, including the conference Russia—UK: Five Centuries of Cultural Relations. For more information on the program, see: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/63700/pdf (23/10/2023).

2. I refer to 'the West' throughout to indicate Western Europe and North America.

3. In the nineteenth century see, for example, Russia's settler colonialism in the Northwest Caucasus and the Circassian genocide. From Nicholas I's policy of 'pacification' or 'annihilation' (Kivelson and Suny 2017: 172) in 1829 to strategies of 'extermination' under General Nikolai Evdokimov (Richmond 2013: 92—97) in the 1860s, the Russian military had purged the entire Circassian population through massacres, forced deportation and exile, starvation, and village raids by 1864. In the first half of the twentieth century, see the Holodomor (Great Famine) and purges of the intelligentsia in Ukraine, which Raphael Lemkin (2009: 126)—the lawyer who coined the term genocide in 1944—called 'the classic example of Soviet genocide' whose goal was 'the destruction of the Ukrainian nation.' As for the twenty-first century, see discussions of Russia's genocide of Ukraine by academics (Hinton 2023, Snyder 2022), specialists in international criminal law (Azarov, Koval, Nuridzhanian, and Venher 2023), and NGOs (New Lines Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights 2022).

4. As 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (2023)—an open letter from Russia's indigenous and decolonial activists—recently emphasized, the semantic gulf between russkie (ethnic Russians) and rossiiane (Russian nationals) continues to be a marker of racial, ethnic, and religious hierarchies in Russia.

5. For an overview of the deportations, see, for example, the scholarship of J. Otto Pohl (1999: 1—8) and Aurélie Campana's (2007) useful timeline. Pohl (1999: 3) crucially notes that despite their Georgian roots, Joseph Stalin and Lavrentii Beriia 'behaved like Russian chauvinists' in targeting non-Russian nationalities.

6. See Myroslav Shkandrij's (2002) essay on Malevych for more detail on his Kyivan period.

7. For a critical analysis of themes addressed in Putin's text, see Serghii Plokhy's (2021) interview with the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard.

8. In early 2023, Marichka Buchelnikova and Stas Olenchenko joined as co-hosts of Ukrainian Spaces.

9. See, too, Bohdana Kurylo's (2023) recent scholarly account of Westsplaining from a Ukrainian point of view.

10. The colonial myth of 'equal' peoples is still used as a smokescreen to downplay Soviet atrocities and ignore the cruel nuances of ethnic hierarchies. Some scholars (Abashin 2017) continue to argue that the Soviet experience was 'complex' and 'not only [about] oppression' because all national groups had the 'same rights' and received basic state benefits—as if pensions could somehow blunt the pain of deportation and exile.

11. Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat (2022) have recently described this phenomenon in the Russian context as 'Russian imperial innocence.'

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An Act of Love: Three Experiences of Self-Decolonization in the Academic Community of the United Kingdom

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With Vashti Suwa Gbolagun; John Yuen, Ka Keung; Hannah Helm; David Junior Gilbert

An Act of Love: Three Experiences of Self-Decolonization in the Academic Community of the United Kingdom

Keren Poliah; Vashti Suwa Gbolagun; John Yuen, Ka Keung; Hannah Helm; David Junior Gilbert

This narrative essay presents testimonies that uncover the fragmented identity of members of minoritized ethnic groups in the academic context of the United Kingdom. It discusses outcomes of a project which, as part of an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) scholarship from the Doctoral School of the University of Salford, gathered testimonies and stories of international postgraduate doctoral researchers highlighting that the process of decolonization should start from within. Demonstrating how deeply coloniality pervades lands and people, these narratives unveil realities of not fitting in, performing unconventionality, and placing marginalized voices at the forefront. The authors of this essay narrate their journeys towards recognizing their commitment to decolonizing themselves, and underline how this process can provoke change in others.

Keywords: autotheory, decolonization, dialogues, Global South writer, Indigenous, narratives, Western education system

In July 2022, the Doctoral School of the University of Salford advertised three Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) scholarships. One of them, 'Decolonizing research and the PhD,' funded this research project and brought its group of researchers (Keren Poliah, Hannah Helm, and David Junior Gilbert) together. The project aimed to highlight why decolonizing the self is important for postgraduate doctoral researchers studying Indigenous communities.

Our team chose to collect data through narrative interviews—a straightforward means to find out what people think (Stewart 1997). The method involves in-depth conversations allowing the researcher to inquire about interviewees' experiences. Narrative interviews enable participants to draw on their experiences, reflect on their past, and fully engage in the interviews in ways where they feel empowered to guide the conversation with the researcher (Beuthin 2014). Moreover, this is a culturally appropriate way of gathering knowledge from previously colonized communities (Barlo et al. 2021) that minimizes the power dynamics between the researcher and participants. In this study's case, the interviews felt more like friendly conversations that the interviewees guided by narrating their experiences in detail.

The narratives obtained from the transcripts were then inserted into this essay using the neonarrative method, which engages with the interpretation and description of as well as reflection on participants' perspectives (Barett and Bolt 2010). The process involves collecting data from interviews, sorting

the experiences into themes, planning where the narratives fit in the written piece, and understanding the topic by focusing on the knowledge gained from participants.

Two of the researchers interviewed here became part of minoritized ethnic groups the moment they landed in another country where they were no longer the majority. This precipitated their engagement with the issue of self-decolonization, but as their narratives emphasize, that process starts from within. These participants (also presented as this essay's co-authors) draw on Indigenous ways of conveying communities' truths and painful pasts throughout their interviews, using storytelling, testimonies, and dialogues. The essay is divided into three sections, the first focusing on my own (Keren Poliah's) journey to self-decolonization, the second presenting the testimony of the Nigerian writer and educator Vashti Suwa Gbolagun, and the third describing the experiences of John Yuen, a PhD student from Hong Kong.

Decolonization is an act of love

I do not remember exactly how old I was or what I was doing when I suddenly looked at my grandmother with teary eyes. *Mam* (grandmother)*, I think my skin is very ugly. I don't like it*, I said.

> *What don't you like about it, baba* (my child)*?*
> *It's not pretty. It's brown.*

My grandmother removed her foot from the pedal and re-adjusted the needle on her sewing machine. *Give me your hand*, she said.

I placed my hand in front of her and she put my arm next to hers. Her slender fingers curled around my wrist, their oval nails of a burnt umber. Her gold wedding ring winked in the yellow light as she brought my hand under the pagoda table lamp. She placed my hand and hers on the purple sequin fabric she had cut, and we remained like this for a while. I do not remember how long the silence lasted, but it was long enough for me to notice that her skin looked exactly like mine.

Do you see this? She pointed at her hand. *It's the same as yours.* She moved my forearm close enough to hers, so that I felt her soft skin on mine. *If you say your skin is ugly, does it mean that mine looks ugly too?*

I looked at the hand that held mine, the forearm with the veins making their way to her elbow, the black beauty spot on her arm, and the chickenpox scar that left a hole below her shoulder. Her skin color was so magnetic, almost stealing the boldness of the lamp, fabric, and ring. I was surprised by my own skin emanating the same radiance next to hers. I shook my head. *No*, I said, *our skin color looks very pretty.*

My grandmother was a brown woman of Tamil descent, born in Mauritius to a father who abused her, prevented her from going to school, and forced her to work in his factory because she was not as fair-skinned as

her older sister, and he thought she therefore deserved less. I am also a brown woman from Mauritius, but I was loved by every member of my family, whether I was darker or not.

In 2017, I came to the United Kingdom on a student visa for my undergraduate course at the University of Northampton. I spent months settling down and was welcomed by everyone with the question of where I came from. The guesses ranged from 'Pakistan' to 'India' and 'Africa.' When I answered, some were surprised as they had never heard of the tropical island of Mauritius, while others silently processed their thoughts. Most of the time, the reactions culminated in my being asked whether Mauritius was '(still) a Third World country.' In these cases, the use of the term 'Third World' referred to a group of countries regarded as lesser and inferior to the Global North. At first, I defended my country from such assumptions: I maintained that our cities had tall buildings, my phone had internet, and that living in a coastal village did not mean that I jumped into the water at every opportunity. My undergraduate course started that September, and soon all acquaintances of distant relatives in the UK became aware that I was in their country with a scholarship from the Mauritian government as a reward for passing the national examination. This scholarship contributed to the assumption that I was smart, but poor.

Over the next three months, I was told by university peers to correct my accent, to abandon my religious practices, to go clubbing, and to start drinking, because: *Why else did you leave your country and culture?*

Being in the UK became a daily living test of the skills, qualities, and education I had acquired from my 'Third World African island.' I quickly lost the desire to argue with people who presented their biases about Mauritius, and I settled deeper into what Paulo Freire (2000) recognizes as the culture of silence. This culture of silence described my unspoken acceptance of what people thought and said about my home country. These conversations led me to believe that I knew nothing and should not speak out. My grandmother was no longer beside me to encourage a critical consciousness and a mind that appreciated my differences in this world where the legacies of colonialism were perpetuated. Yet, somewhere within my mind, the soft but powerful voice of my grandmother continued to echo: *They know we are special. That is why they chose to oppress us and to keep us under their feet. It is their fear of the unfamiliar, their thirst for power, and our silence that make these relations endure.* The culture of silence was a state of being I became increasingly familiar with—a state where I remained passive and suppressed within unequal social relations.

However, as I met people who were further along the journey of decolonizing themselves, I slowly began to reconsider my stance in this world. As Freire (2000) writes, 'in order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression' (p. 175). This world of oppression had clutched at me back in my home country. It manipulated my actions and perceptions by oppressing my identity and making me want to trade my skin for one that I thought was prettier. Decolonization was still not a word with which I wanted to be familiar. When

educational institutions were challenged through the decentralized political and social Black Lives Matter movement (2013), the Rhodes Must Fall protests (2015), and the Why Is My Curriculum White campaign (2014), I did not yet question where I stood in this world or why I had always been standing there.

As soon as I started a postgraduate degree program, I sought out conversations with people who had managed to break their silence. As a doctoral researcher at the University of Salford, I joined the Minoritized Ethnic Student Collective, where Dr. Suryia Nayak was sharing values and mantras helping students and researchers get through their struggles. One of those mantras, inspired by the African-American poet Audre Lorde, (2017) was 'Silence will not protect you.' This mantra sowed one of the seeds of my earnest interest in self-decolonization. As I attended the Minoritized Ethnic Student Collective meetings, I heard about the experiences and struggles of other postgraduates. When I understood the realities of the communities facing racist and imperialist ideas, I decided to engage in re-creating myself through an awareness of the painful past of others. I continuously engaged in conversations with others to foster empathic engagement and build my own commitment to decolonizing myself.

To me, decolonization became an act of love. As Freire (2000) so beautifully puts it, 'love is an act of courage'; 'love is commitment to others' (p. 89). The legacies of colonialism do not treat different minds, bodies, and lands with love and respect. Instead, these legacies lead us into recognizing some beliefs or practices as superior, inferior, or needing to change in order to fit the 'accepted' Western conventions. These legacies are part of why my grandmother's father felt more love for his fair elder daughter, why he cherished and protected her while making my grandmother feel inferior. My grandmother, even though she was not as literate as our society would have liked her to be, had a most humane and loving approach toward self-decolonization. On the day I told her I hated my skin, she created space for my mind to be silent for reflection. She let me become ready to listen, understand, and reflect on her words. This dialogue between us existed in the presence of profound love between a grandmother and her granddaughter.

The same love also exists between the people I met and interviewed for this narrative essay. Their stories are narrated here in the ways in which they were told during the interviews. This essay thus becomes a space for the interviewees to speak for themselves.

As part of my journey towards decolonizing myself, I inquired how my interviewees (whom I rather call friends) pursued their research, practice, and relations through a decolonizing lens. I initially approached my friends with my own understanding of self-decolonization, quoting Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird (2005): 'Decolonizing is the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, lands' (p. 5). The conversation about decolonization flowed from academic thoughts to personal experiences as my friends explained what it meant to them. Through extracts from these conversations, the next two sections of the essay convey why decolonizing the

self is important to my friends. The embedded narratives demonstrate what they do to commit to this ongoing process that shaped their reflexive experiences.

We have all been molded differently

For the Nigerian writer and educator Vashti Suwa Gbolagun, decolonizing means a process through which she can honor her people and reframe their history. For her doctoral research, Vashti wrote a collection of autobiographical writings consisting of short stories and poems on the effect of tin mining on the Jos Plateau. She graduated in 2022, with her thesis providing a model for exploring alternative approaches to doctoral research. Throughout this section, the italicized words are spoken by Vashti (2023, personal communication[1]).

> *My PhD wasn't the conventional type, as I incorporated my native languages and structured my thesis with the intention of talking about how the legacies of colonialism and their impact could articulate the experiences of my people. I wanted to contextualize my research findings to encourage people coming after me to write through their authentic selves without being subjected to the rigors of Anglo-centric conventions.*

Through the process of re-inventing the thesis genre in order to create stories that connect her people to the land, Vashti had to decolonize herself in ways that Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Smith (2012) explains. Decolonizing the self involves 'processes for questioning the limits and possibilities of our own awareness, understanding what fills our minds and why, understanding our desires and fears and how they have been shaped, and being honest about the choices we make in terms of our engagements' with those who stand under the umbrella of white privilege (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 198). As such, Vashti constantly reflected on her actions and thoughts to know what she should decolonize within her. This internal process was fueled as she turned to her native tongue to express herself. She felt strongly about using Pidgin and Hausa to take her thesis to another level of connecting with her people. *I had to be malleable for assessors,* Vashti says, *firm for my people, and know what I wanted to do to achieve those goals.*

Vashti was not content with only switching to Pidgin, as colonization did more than denigrate the languages she spoke: in fact, it colonized her mind, consciousness, and sense of being, as well as 'disrupted [the] fundamental senses of what constitutes life' (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 198). Vashti had to overcome a crisis where she asked herself daily whether it was correct to go against the norm of conforming to the traditions of research practice. Because of the unconventional nature of her thesis, she felt the need to keep excusing the writerly decisions she was taking to portray the biographical narratives of environmental degradation as correlated to the stories of women going through rape and trauma in the colonial era. These topics were not easy to write about, but they were based on oral evidence of the extremely painful events Vashti's people had survived that she had gathered throughout her life. She remained in touch with her

roots through engaging with texts and theories by African writers; using the creative writing methodology of 'memory retention and collection' to make sense of oral stories; and appealing to elders by performing her poetry using the techniques of oral storytelling used in her community. The autobiographical and biographical testimonies in Vashti's research were forged from the voice of her decolonizing mind, thereby helping her people to follow in her footsteps.

As an African writer, Vashti fortified her commitment to others as she went through her struggles and thought of those who would come after her. *I am the seed for the people where I come from. I have been planted and will patiently wait until harvest.*

She worked towards leaving a legacy of hope and change for her people as she used storytelling as a tool to decolonize the self by representing their diverse truths (Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

> *For me, decolonizing means educating people about overcoming differences to cultivate a spirit of acceptance rather than a spirit of tolerance. I hope to educate my heart to better express what my people went through. I seek to educate my mind to better focus on the dialogues sustaining respectful relationships.*

When she came to the United Kingdom, she strengthened her purpose of remembering the painful past of her people in order to connect the threads of history with experience. Her introspection brought her to connect minds, bodies, place, experience, trauma, and history. She sought to lift the silence which blankets families and individuals after traumatic events, when they are torn apart by the destruction brought on by colonialism. Since the Jos Plateau was opened up for tin mining and an influx of people came in, members of Vashti's community have suffered in numerous ways. People survived environmental degradation. People lost homes, animals, farms, and their own lives. Cancer rates—and death rates—rose. Women's implication by tin mining was overlooked, as they were thought to be the weaker sex who remained at home, when, in fact, they were raped, forced to bear the children of colonial masters, and prevented from speaking about what they were going through because it was deemed culturally inappropriate. There was a long silence after these traumatic events when the painful experiences were pushed into the background, erased from public memory, and disregarded. The scarcity of materials published and available on the challenges and lives of Vashti and her people meant that someone had to step forward to articulate the taboo in the name of those who no longer had a voice. Vashti believed that it is only after the taboo had been acknowledged and articulated that people could work towards breaking it. *I wrote for myself and others who [had] suffered, lived, and died*, she says.

Her writing explored issues in imaginative and critical ways that remained true to her people. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) writes, Indigenous writers create texts for an Indigenous audience and 'seek to use language in ways that capture the messages, nuances and flavour of Indigenous lives' (p. 171). Intending to paint her pain and that of her people, Vashti found solace and strength in

disrupting the legacies of colonialism she had lived through by using Pidgin and Hausa. For her, using the native languages meant decolonizing herself, as the chains preventing her from speaking Pidgin and Hausa go back to her primary school days.

> At my primary school, we were beaten and fined for using any languages other than English. I was forced to speak English and I had to speak it properly, otherwise I would be punished. Sometimes they made us kneel in the scorching sun and beat us with wooden sticks. This is one instance I always remember as back then I did not think anything of it; obedience to the Western ways was instilled from a very young age. But as I grew up, I looked back and wondered why I was made to behave as such and to abandon my native tongue.

To free herself and her people from the shackles of intellectual imperialism, Vashti was prepared to dismantle the imperialist perception that *nothing good comes from the colonized African countries, not even their language*. The revitalized use of Pidgin and Hausa in her thesis meant that these will be resources and examples for the generations, both old and new, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, across the world.

Unfortunately, years later, when her son was born and they settled in the United Kingdom, he went through an experience where his personal linguistic repertoire led to cultural bias and misunderstandings.

> One day, my son needed to take medication as he had a headache. In Nigeria, we don't usually say 'I need to take my medication'; instead we'll use 'I need to take my drugs.' You can imagine what happened when my teenage boy went up to his teacher during classroom hours and said, 'Miss, can I take my drugs?'

The teacher was visibly shaken and asked for a confirmation. *Your drugs?* And the son naively repeated, *Yes, I need to take drugs.* This perceived act of an African boy having a strong impulse to take drugs and casually asking the teacher for permission caused a commotion. The teacher sought a colleague's support. They inquired into the cause for this impulsive and dangerous behavior, only to find out that there was a cultural misunderstanding, as the 'drugs' referred to were over-the-counter painkillers.

The situations that Vashti and her son faced in their school days exemplify intellectual imperialism. Years ago, Vashti was forbidden from using her native tongue at school; in the present, English views of Nigerians have not changed, as evidenced by teachers' racist assumptions about Vashti's son. Intellectual imperialism is a legacy of colonialism that is cultivated to maintain unequal relations and promote superiority of some races. As Syed Hussein Alatas (2000) writes, 'intellectual imperialism is the domination of one people by another in their world of thinking' (p. 24). One of the traits of imperialism is to keep Indigenous people under a form of tutelage where they are considered wards taught how to act, think, and speak in ways that are accepted by the colonial masters. Another trait is to dominate people by forcing them to conform

to a set of rules, ways of living and organizing their wider systems (educational, social, political, legal). These traits eventually make people feel embarrassed of their culture or identity as they face colonial hegemonic discourses (Gomes 2003). Vashti's and her son's language exist as part of the legacy of colonialism in Nigeria; it is an effect of intellectual imperialism encouraged by (former) colonial masters. Vashti was taught that her native languages would never be good enough to express herself and that adopting the language of colonial masters would lead her to a better way of living. In reality, these colonial masters' descendants continue to propagate the opinion that 'Africans' must remain under tutelage to become better people, presenting them as drug addicts (Kalunta-Crumpton 2008, Wanigaratne et al. 2009, Godkhindi et al. 2022).

> *We need to understand [that] people have different ways of being, thinking, and articulating. I strongly believe that there needs to be more than an apathetic and superficial understanding of our cultural differences. There is a need for a fusion of cultures so that one is not considered as superior to or better than another. We need to bring people back to the reality that we come from different backgrounds and are molded differently.*

This *fusion* does not refer to the literal merging or displacement of cultures, but it accounts for what Alberto Gomes (2021) describes as follows: 'We must be prepared to learn *from* Indigenous peoples and not just learn *about* them for a better world' (p. 38, my emphases). Learning from Indigenous peoples is one aspect of self-decolonizing that can be achieved through educating ourselves via 'school and university curricula, media, blogs, social media, books, documentary films, art, theatre and musical performances, and public talks' (Gomes and Kundu 2021: 38) about Indigenous communities by Indigenous people.

Vashti challenged the traditional academic genre of the thesis as she engaged with decolonizing herself. Her thesis had initially sat in the discipline of literature until the practice of decolonizing led to auto-theory. Eventually, this transformed her project into a creative writing one, a significant shift that meant a change of her supervisory team. She was guided by creative writers who understood what she wanted to achieve, let her lead the research into her community, and were by her side to refine her work. Vashti and her supervisors engaged with auto-theory as a space which provided opportunities to reframe, redefine, rework, and reimagine the painful experiences of formerly colonized populations.

The practice of auto-theory enabled Vashti to acknowledge the presence of the 'I' in research and writing. As Lauren Fournier (2021) writes, auto-theory is a provocation, and it integrates the self with theory, particularly for 'women and people of color' (p. 5). By partaking in self-decolonizing and auto-theory, Vashti produced a unique autobiographical piece for her thesis. She stresses how helpful her supervisors were at polishing her work and guiding her towards the practice of self-decolonizing, creative writing, and auto-theory, which were new to her. The supervisors were dedicated to Vashti's aims and objectives. They accompanied her along her journey with dialogues,

empathy, understanding, care, patience, and love. In fact, Vashti's supervisors were involved with self-decolonization in ways similar to those that John Yuen describes in the next section when talking about his own experiences.

Our culture is not the fundamental law

One of the dialogues contributing to my understanding of self-decolonization and empathic engagement happened with John Yuen, Ka Keung, originally from Hong Kong. He is a counsellor doing his doctoral research on person-centered therapy in a Chinese community in Manchester. He is studying how counselling is conducted in the Chinese community and is looking at the generalizability of a Western-based counselling model when brought into a non-Western culture. His research journey contributed to various reflections on his practice, and above all, on decolonizing himself within his own community. Throughout this section, the italicized words are the testimony and stories spoken by John (2023, personal communication[2]). Born in British colonial Hong Kong before the 1997 handover to China, John describes himself as *Hong Kong Chinese*.

> *For us, we are completely immersed in Western culture. Hong Kong has more than a century of colonial rule, and the ruling class during this time were white. In a culture that respects hierarchy and seeks harmonious relationships, there is a strong sense to say, 'Yes sir, no sir,' to avoid open confrontation and conform to colonial expectations with the white ruling class. However, I am acutely aware of the expectation to not conform, speak out, and make yourself heard while I'm in the UK. Globally, Han Chinese is the largest ethnicity, with around 1.4 billion people, and I don't feel this conflict when I am with people from my culture. I don't feel unheard or unseen, and yet, it is only when I'm in the UK that there is a transformation taking place. I become this 'ethnic minority,' where I feel a palpable pressure to conform to expectations, constantly pushing back at caricatures of what an ethnic Chinese person should be. The more I try to explain who I am and where I stand, the more I find it difficult. And I see the need to decolonize [myself].*

This struggle with identity is also seen in Alberto Gomes (2003), a Malaysian-born Australian of Goan Indian descent, who so eloquently explains that 'identity is not a zero-sum game where the attainment of one leads to the displacement of another.' Gomes (2003) mentions that the first aspect of his identity is his birthplace and the country where he grew up. Eventually, people receive a lot of cultural experiences from the places and countries that they live in and that form the background of who they are.

Similarly, John had the opportunity to observe his own cultural experiences and those of his colleagues when he worked in China, with Chinese people in a Western company. Understanding his position based on his identity and culture drove the way he acted and thought. His observations of one colleague made him realize further that conformity was always expected when faced to a Western culture.

> *This Chinese employee was targeted by the boss as not having the right attitude at work*

because he was too humble, calm, and unassertive. Seeking to understand the mindset of that employee, I asked him: What would you say would make the perfect employee? And that employees answer was: When your boss does something wrong, and you know it's wrong, to correct it without him knowing.

During our conversation, John proceeded to tell me the following: *I thought, 'Wow, that is Chinese!'* There is this difference in thinking that John found difficult to put into words and yet, he understood his colleague's urge to behave that way. However, his Western boss was unsatisfied with that behavior because the employee was not assertive and speaking out during meetings. The irony here is that the colleague *was* being assertive by not conforming to the boss's expectation of what a good employee should be and insisting on following his cultural beliefs even if this meant he was to be punished for doing so. In other words, he was being assertive in the 'wrong way.'

Like that employee, many individuals choose to behave or think in a certain way because of their cultural experiences and differences. They are told that their ways are not acceptable or that they simply do not know how to do anything correctly. Syed Farid Alatas (2007) expounds this as a case of ethnocentrism, where individuals or groups are judged as per the standards and categories of another, dominant culture. In the case John observed, the Western boss judged his Chinese employee according to his own Western standards, which he considered to be better. This makes John ask the following:

If I say someone's ways are wrong, then from which perspective am I saying this? Because within that person's cultural context, they are right. We encourage this assumption that we are right even though we are looking at the world through a specific lens and with a different worldview than others.

John explained his practice of self-decolonizing as an interrelated process of (a) self-reflection on our past behavior, (b) cultivation of understanding, and (c) self-awareness. He argues that we need to put ourselves at the very center of critical self-reflection when we start the process of self-decolonizing. Upon reflecting on our past behaviors, we need to ask ourselves: *Do I want to understand someone's culture and differences, or do I want a version of who they are tailored to my understanding?* Answering this question allows us to notice whether we are ready to step into a space where we realize that our culture is not the fundamental law. The next leap is to recognize that our way is not the only way to be.

The whole purpose of decolonizing is that we can understand things and perceive others beyond our own cultures. Understanding your own culture is fundamental to cultivating the ability to understand other people's cultures. This has been an important learning from my current research because I often held the assumption that people already understood their own culture [and are therefore able] to understand the issues or appreciations I raised about mine. The problem is that, in the Global North, there isn't much understanding of other cultures. Of course, I'm generalizing, but I don't walk down the road expecting people

to understand China or the cultural differences in Hong Kong. People have previously asked me, 'What?! Can you get coffee in China? Isn't it a Third World country?' And I assume that it is the same about Mauritius. If you speak about Mauritius, we only think of holidays, the sun, sand, and sea. But that is not everything that the country is about.

Self-awareness is a process that makes people ready to perceive existing differences between their own and other cultures. John recalled his experience at a university in Hong Kong where he spoke in English and everyone else at the university was expected to switch to English when they spoke to him. This led him to realize how there was a lot more understanding and acceptance of English culture and Western ways in other countries of the world; in contrast, it is quite rare to meet people at a UK university who understand and speak Chinese.

The people who are more along the process of understanding their own culture have more of the ability to understand other people's cultures. Understanding an 'other' culture requires an awareness of one's own culture, cultural biases, privileges, cultural inability to set aside stereotypes, prejudices, racist and imperialist thoughts, and anything else that is in the way of accepting someone's differences.

This awareness of our world and who we are allows us to perceive others and bridge the divides leading to empathic engagement.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) writes that 'the Westernized university is basically reduced to that of learning these theories born from the experience and problems of a particular region of the world [...] with its own particular time/space dimensions and "applying" them to other geographical locations even if the experience and time/space of the former are quite different from the latter' (p. 74). This epistemic privilege accorded to Western countries is what pushed John to decolonize himself. His dialogues and exchanges of thoughts with others (and internally) lead to the realization that the assumed inferiority of some worldviews is a legacy of colonialism. It is essential that decolonization reaches the core of our self as we ascertain what makes us who we are and strive to recognize the value of the world in which others live.

Opening the gates and being willing to go through them

In his interview, John Yuen expressed that decolonizing cannot be a one-way process where it is down to us to explain and do everything for others to understand. It also requires our interlocutors to be willing to try to understand what exists outside their world. If we simply establish the gates of our world and wait for decolonization to happen, it is not going to work. It is by opening the gates and being willing to go through them that decolonizing happens. Vashti mirrored this thought, stating that there will be many hurdles, but we owe it to our ancestors and the future generations to commit to decolonizing. Like my friends, I (Keren) believe that our commitment to decolonizing ourselves is a

lengthy, ongoing process full of obstacles. What fuels my passion is the love that my grandmother instilled in me and that I believe we can all cultivate for ourselves, others, and this world.

In our endeavor to decolonize, the participants of this research project are co-authors. Staying true to decolonization and to Indigenous community values, we believe that participants should not only be acknowledged and thanked in the acknowledgements section. These narratives would not have existed without the co-authors; thus, to show our appreciation for the journey, experiences, and differences of everyone whose emotional truth forms part of this essay, we share this piece as our co-creation.

As presented in this essay, there are numerous processes to engage with self-decolonization. I (Keren) take a peaceful and empathic approach since I view decolonization as an act of love and care for others. I believe that by caring for others and creating a space for them to express themselves like in this essay, we can engage in dialogues which will lead us towards decolonizing the self.

For Vashti, the practice of self-decolonizing means that she becomes aware of her limitations and steps out of existing colonial thoughts. She connects to her roots and reflects on whether the Western practices learned in academic institutions are really appropriate for studying a non-Western culture. This process implies challenging the Anglo-centric PhD while remaining patient and dedicated to writing about the painful experiences of formerly colonized populations.

John's interview emphasizes the dedication and rigorous questioning required to decolonize the self and become self-aware of our own cultural stereotypes and biases when viewing other cultures. Research, studies, dialogues, and works about decolonizing oneself are continuously created every year as decolonizing remains an ongoing process.

In fact, we might not truly know whether we have decolonized ourselves completely or not, and if this is possible to achieve in our postcolonial capitalist society. Still, we researchers strongly believe that we can hope to understand the process and commit to it simply as an act of love towards ourselves and others.

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'Dotokpo' and Soak Up the Ancestral Logic in the Ghanaian Spoken-word Poet Yom Nfojoh's Record *Alter Native*

Sela Kodjo Adjei

'Dotokpo' and Soak Up the Ancestral Logic in the Ghanaian Spoken-word Poet Yom Nfojoh's Record *Alter Native*

Sela Kodjo Adjei

This critical essay offers deep insights into the Ghanaian performance-poet and writer Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*. Yom shares allegories, autobiographical accounts, confessions, and critical self-reflections aimed at attaining personal freedom, self-decolonization, and self-reformation. For Yom, the radical decision to publicly share his personal struggles and issues of national concern through music, storytelling, and spoken-word poetry served as a liberating force that freed his mind from the colonial aftershock, the burden of personal guilt, and the Eurocentric education affecting contemporary African societies. As a result, both critical self-reflection and a scathing assessment of neocolonial problems serve him as a rebellious path to self-discovery, self-care, healing, and mental emancipation. By means of textual analysis and a systematic reading of Yom's spoken word poems, I deconstruct key verses and stanzas in his poems to reveal decolonial praxis, self-disclosure, and coded messages. Wielding his oratory skills as poetic license to freely 'speak his mind,' Yom also confesses the 'sins' and 'ills' of political elites to publicly reveal the post-colonial plight of Africans in contemporary times. Yom's self-disclosure and self-decolonization processes operate as what Foucault diagnosed as 'beasts of confession.' Through this transformative creative process of sublimation, Yom employs spoken word poetry to achieve agency and to reassert personal power for self-reformation and positive national consciousness. Broadening the discussion, this essay incorporates my personal perspectives as an artist who likewise pursues decolonial aesthetics by highlighting my engagement with Aŋlɔ-Eʋe Vodu art in relation to my artistic research and practice.

Yom Nfojoh's Poetic Journey to Self-Reflection and Re-education

Yom Nfojoh is a celebrated Ghanaian performance-poet and writer from the Volta Region of Ghana. Prior to the release of his EP *Alter Native* in 2022, Yom's creative journey revolved around live shows and selected performances in Accra. Over the years, his approach to spoken word poetry has evolved, based on feedback from his audience. Yom's passion for music also motivated him to employ varied instrumentation to complement his poems. Before reading further, I highly recommend immersing yourself in Yom's EP *Alter Native*, which is accessible on most music streaming platforms.
        Yom's storytelling on the EP spans a broad range of social issues.

Some are rooted in tradition, such as 'Sakawa' and its ethical complexities reminiscent of traditional West African trickster tales. The poem 'Somebody' serves as a critique of societal divisions, prejudice, envy and ethnic rivalries that hinder progress and unity. 'Dotokpo' draws on ancestral wisdom, and 'Paa Joe' is a moral self-inquiry inspired by Yom's personal experiences.

Yom's artistic evolution as captured in his record reflects a contemporary response to the historical context of African colonialism and its enduring effects. His journey from performing live shows in Accra to the creation of this EP goes hand-in-hand with a deeper exploration of themes central to contemporary experiences in Ghana. The record's vivid portrayal of personal and communal narratives echoes the broader historical experiences of colonialism, exploitation, and miseducation that have shaped the African continent for the past centuries. This connection between Yom's personal artistic evolution and the wider historical context sets the stage for understanding the significance of his work in the ongoing discourse of post-colonial African identity and cultural revival. His work is important because it challenges the colonial aftershock and empowers individuals and communities to reflect on social issues to reclaim their identities and self-determination.

I personally find Yom's work compelling because his personal journey is intertwined with my own artistic research and spiritual journey. My work also highlights the importance of questioning colonial education by means of critical self-inquiry and a pursuit of knowledge from within one's own cultural milieu. As an artist and a lecturer at the University of Media, Arts and Communication in Accra, Ghana, my work sits at the intersection of studio practice and pedagogy. This dual passion informs everything I do, leading me to explore the relationship between art, colonial history, philosophy, education, and studio practices.

In the past decade, I have embarked on a conscious journey to re-center indigenous knowledge, using it as a philosophical framework for my artistic expression and pedagogy. My approach seeks theoretical frameworks that resonate with the lived realities of African scholars and students. When I engage in research or share my findings, a primary concern is the question of how we discuss artistic research within the African context. My aim is to prevent the repetition of mistakes made by early Eurocentric writers, whose inaccurate ethnographic publications continue to influence some African scholars today. I firmly believe that African theorists and knowledge systems should take precedence over Western epistemological frameworks.

This 'theorizing from within' approach is driven by my own educational experience. As an artist, I recognize the profound deficiencies of an education system that is still largely rooted within a colonial educational framework. Contemporaries schooled through similar colonial educational systems, Yom and I both prioritize preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, especially in the face of globalization and 'Western' hegemony. Through African-centered books, continuous self-education,

and mentorship from esteemed African scholars, I strive to unlearn and challenge the colonial education I received. This ongoing process fuels my artistic and academic pursuits, propelling me to advocate for knowledge systems that more justly reflect the African experience. In essence, like Yom, I am also an artist, a researcher, and a passionate advocate for decolonizing artistic narratives and research methodologies. This educational journey is one of constant learning, unlearning, and relearning, guided by African epistemologies.

Return of the 'Cathedral': Navigating Cultural Identity and the Colonial Aftershock through Ghanaian Poetry

Many African countries have a long history of colonialism, exploitation, and miseducation. These issues continue to adversely impact African communities today. The contemporary art world has traditionally been dominated by Western methodologies and art theories, which has led to a Eurocentric bias and marginalized the contributions of African artists and poets. With the enduring social problems that colonialism has caused in African societies, artists and poets play a vital role in challenging the Eurocentric bias in the art world and promoting self-decolonization through their creative expressions. They use their work to explore and celebrate African culture and heritage, to critique the colonial aftershock, and to envision a dignified and equitable future.

The early generation of Ghanaian poets, including Raphael Armattoe, Efua Sutherland, Abena Busia, Kofi Anyidoho, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor, and Attukwei Okai, played a vital role in challenging colonial stereotypes which denigrated African cultural values while promoting nationalism and self-decolonization through their work. They greatly relied on Ghanaian oratory skills and rhetoric to write compelling poems which reappraised and celebrated Ghanaian cultural values and heritage.

For instance, Kofi Awoonor's poem 'The Cathedral' (1964) served as a thought-provoking exploration of Africa's encounter with colonial disruption: a clash between traditional African spirituality and Western influences. The poem employs vivid imagery and symbolism to depict a cathedral, a symbol of Christian religion, looming over the landscape of African culture. Awoonor skillfully portrays the cathedral as an overbearing colonial presence, casting a grotesque shadow over the natural surroundings, indigenous beliefs, and spiritual practices of Ghanaian people, who are deeply connected to ancestral veneration. The contrast between the 'hegemonic walls' of the cathedral and the 'sacred grove' of the ancestors highlights the tension between these two conflicting worlds.

Today, five decades after his poem was written, it comes as no surprise that witty social critics in contemporary Ghana invoked Awoonor's 'huge senseless cathedral of doom' in response to the ruling NPP government's scandalous and inflation-ridden 'investment' in building a 'National Cathedral.' This interdenominational Christian church

was supposed to be inaugurated in Accra in 2018—however, this never happened, and the cathedral still does not exist. The building was intended as a pledge, physically manifested by Ghana's current president Akufo-Addo, to pay testament to the 'grace and victory' God served to his ruling party, the NPP, in the 2016 Ghanaian national elections. The controversial $400 million state-funded church (whose budget ballooned from an original estimate of $100 million) gradually came to elicit the resentment of most Ghanaians, leading to scathing criticism against the ruling NPP government.

Thus, several decades after Awoonor's 'Cathedral' was written, it still conveys a sharp critique of corruption while drawing attention to how cultural values are being eroded by neo-colonial influences. Ultimately, 'The Cathedral' invites readers to reflect on the socio-cultural transformations brought about by colonialism and the lingering presence of ancestral beliefs, cultural values, and spiritual practices in contemporary Ghanaian societies.

Prior to Awoonor's rise as a celebrated Ghanaian poet, Raphael Armattoe (1913—53), an astute poet, scientist, and Eʋe nationalist, had similarly challenged the double standards of Christian teachings and the problems they posed to Africans deeply connected to Vodu. Vodu is a spiritual practice and knowledge system from West Africa fundamentally rooted in the reverence and veneration of ancestors. For Armattoe, going back to his African spiritual roots was a practical step to reassert his cultural identity:

> 'Tell them I'll go no more
> To their village school
> I go back to my own,
> The Clay idol and the Legba
> The Se and Bokonon
> I go back to the Asperges
> Of Afla and the slaughtered fowl'
> (Armattoe 1954: *55*).

Beyond the Creative Influences that Shaped Yom's EP *Alter Native*

Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native* finds resonance with the legacy of influential Ghanaian poets such as Awoonor and Armattoe, and with the broader movement for decolonization and cultural revival. Like them, Yom uses poetry and music as tools to challenge colonial narratives and reassert African cultural values. Yom's work is often quite critical of colonialism and neo-colonial problems in Ghanaian societies, which challenges his listeners to critically reflect on the world around them.

Moreover, this EP goes beyond earlier African poets and nationalists in exploring the possibilities of self-decolonization through

artistic expression. His lyrics are introspective, often exploring complex themes with sophistication and nuance. This is one of the main reasons why I find Yom's work important. By reclaiming our own personal narratives, we are positioned as artists to explore pertinent social issues in ways which are truly meaningful and relevant to our social experiences. It also embodies a collective approach to decolonial creative work that is meditated on, composed, recorded, and performed in community.

Yom's Pan-African influences are particularly evident in his rare mix of styles and sounds. Yom's music is deeply engaged with the works of a wide range of other musicians, artists, and Pan-African poets. A careful listener can discern influences from accomplished poets like Kofi Anyidoho, Kofi Awoonor, Jamaican dub-poet Kwesi Linton Johnson, and musical icons like Gyedu Blay Ambolley, Amandzeba, A. B. Crentsil, and Saka Acquaye. The rhythms and style adopted in Yom's record can be linked to musical groups like Hedzole and Osibisa.[5] Other influences can be traced to Agbadza rhythms, jazz, Atongo Zimba, the afrobeat king Fela Kuti, the legendary percussionist Nii Adjiri Williams (aka Shikome), the Togolese singer Afia Mala, Ivorian singer Dobet Gnahoré, and diaspora artistes like Akua Naru, De La Soul, India Arie, Teddy Pendegrass, Gil Scot-Heron, Nasir Jones, and Jamaican reggae icon Barrington Levy.

Ever since Yom released his single 'Serwaa Akoto' (featuring TarandBella), I have been following his creative journey keenly. I was privileged enough to receive a copy of *Alter Native* to critically review it ahead of the release. As university mates at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (2005—2009), our paths crossed because Yom and I shared a number of mutual friends. During our final year, we regularly had 'sittings' in the forecourts of Evandy Hostel (in Bomso, Kumasi) where we discussed philosophical matters deep into the night while musing about life after graduating from university.

On 11 March 2022, an intimate crowd of privately invited guests gathered at the Hush Lounge in Accra's Labone Coffee Shop to support the release of Yom's debut EP, *Alter Native*. Among these invited guests were poets like Paul God, Poetra Asantewaa, and Elikplim Akorli; rappers like Kwadjo Spiri; filmmaker Fofo Gavua; and Yom's childhood friends from the early 1990s. Apart from the rhythmic percussion, the lyrics of the songs make the EP clearly stand out as a well-crafted anthology of poetry. Poetra Asantewaa, an acclaimed poet, shared this view in personal conversation with me:

> 'The *Alter Native* EP is a fusion of spoken word poetry with multi-genre production and composition, in a way that has made it distinctly different by placing it at the intersections of a range of influences' (Asantewaa 2022, personal communication).[6]

Two Spanish students who were both conducting their master's research on contemporary Ghanaian music also joined the release party. Their separate feedback summarizes Yom's eclectic style:

'Very emotive way of bringing different kinds of music and artists into his poetry. The passion and work put on his verses showed how deeply connected he is to the issues and topics present in his poems. His poetry is adventurous, emotional, strong, soft and fun all at the same time. We especially loved the poem about how beautiful and powerful the African woman is. We are excited to listen to his EP again!!' (Anonymous 2022, personal communication).[7]

Figure 1. Selected audience listening to *Alter Native* EP, 2022. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 2. A portrait of Yom The Poet. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Alter Native features artists like Feli Nuna, ZBudda, Verony, Villy, and Yom's father Captain Nfojoh, who served in Ghana's PNDC regime[8] after the 1979 military junta led by J. J. Rawlings. Vocal artists such as Villy from Nigeria and Zibudda from Ivory Coast/Togo were especially featured to expand the musical horizon and cultural diversity of the record and to brand it as a true West African project. The album was recorded live with the Senku Live Band, which is based in Accra. Jayso, one of Ghana's most prolific sound engineers, mixed and mastered the EP.

The cultural diversity expressed in this record projects Yom's linguistic prowess above his contemporaries. A master wordsmith, Yom presents his audience with Ga, Twi, Eʋe and Pidjin expressions. Yom's multi-lingual flow reflects the cosmopolitan nature of Ghanaian settlements, particularly the cities Ho, Obuasi, Kumasi, and suburbs of Accra[9] that shaped Yom's creative spirit and upbringing. As the son of a former Ghanaian diplomat from the revolutionary PNDC regime, Yom has personally been exposed to various cultures, languages, and ethnic groups in Ghana. The social context of Yom's

poems is significant because it roots his work in the lived experiences and cultural realities of contemporary African societies, particularly Ghana. By incorporating issues of national concern into his poetry, Yom lends authenticity to his artistic expressions and elevates the relevance of his themes—ranging from gender dynamics to socioeconomic challenges. This contextual grounding allows readers and listeners to engage more deeply with the issues at hand, fostering a connection that transcends the aesthetic. Moreover, it positions his poetry as a powerful medium for social commentary and change, offering perspectives that challenge prevailing norms and encourage critical reflection on societal values and practices.

Figure 3. Captain Nfojoh at the *Alter Native* EP release. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Cultural Awakening, Self-Decolonization, and Critical Self-Reflection One Verse at a Time

The album chronicles Yom's transformation from his previous self to embrace a true representation of his African identity on multiple fronts. He takes great inspiration from his Eʋe roots and the ancient customs and traditions hardwired into the African psyche. Commenting on the EP, Yom states that:

> '*Alter Native* is my attempt to communicate on all fronts, to present a modern African art form which encompasses all the tools, experiences and influences available to us... [The album] employs an array of musical genres both traditional and foreign to make for the creation of a masterful blend' (Nfojoh 2022).

Figure 4. Yom the Poet.
© Yom Nfojoh, all rights
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permission.

The album's title reads as 'alternative,' as in 'alternative music': popularly known as 'Alté,' this sub-genre of underground urban West African music is produced by performers who are eclectic and outside the mainstream. Yet, Yom cannot be pigeonholed into a single genre or subculture. *Alter Native* takes you on a Griots sankofa journey through life, language, history, culture, and tradition.

Yom's poems serve as a powerful entry point into his imaginative world. The narrative approach to each poem evokes cryptic messages of a soothsayer that leap out of the archives of ancient oral histories, Eʋe mythology, and sage philosophy. From the Eʋe migration saga to urban social commentary, spoken word poetry, performance traditions and allegories seamlessly blend into folktales, music and critical self-reflection.

His first poem, 'Dotokpo,' embodies a dialogue between the past and the present, connecting ancestral wisdom with contemporary reflections. 'Dotokpo' (literally translated as 'be quiet') narrates the story of a disoriented child picking up pearls of wisdom at the feet of his grandfather:

> My grandfather said to me, son, you're a child of this tradition,
> No different from the ancestor of a thousand years who plunged his fingers into the mud,
> From this mass today you call dirt
> Pots were molded,
> Pots which would keep water of life that sustained your great grandmother in youth
> Your lips unfold with breath cushioned in language as though a new leaf unravels
> blɛoo... sɛ gbɛa na ʃonu nɛ afiɛ nɛ fa

Upon a navel, you were connected to a power to charge your existence
So you were strong enough to wander from source
And if you ever run out of energy, the fathers of my fathers left you drums, song, dance
from which your strength should stand
Fortified from the battery of those that wish we harm,

My son, my son,
He sang in the sun,
You are but a future ancestor,

The seeds sown before you are now fruits from which you must plant,
Do you see yourself above this humble rank?
A farmer of culture?

That the times are different mean not that your ties have shifted?
Child your nature defines you regardless of the environment that clothes you,
In this favor we found you can a favor be asked you?
In your hurry to achieve would you take us along? [...]
The eyes of souls who poured water on the walls of Agorkorli's Kingdom
Follow you in hope and prayer that you may become one with reason.

Figure 5. The late Tsiamegah of Anlo State, John Koblah Adzrah, pouring libation in honor of the ancestors during the 2019 Hogbetsotso festival at Anloga, Ghana. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Yom's mention of Agorkorli's kingdom in *Dotopko* is a reference to the mythical story of the Eʋe migration from Notsie, a city in modern-day Togo, to their present location in the southeastern part of Ghana. According to legend, the Eʋe people were originally part of the larger group of the Gbe-speaking people in Notsie. They lived under the rule of King Agorkorli, whose reign became increasingly tyrannical. To escape his oppression, the Eʋe sought a means to flee Notsie without arousing suspicion. Some settled in present-day Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, while others continued to the Volta Region of modern-day Ghana. This migration story is a cornerstone of Eʋe

identity, symbolizing their resilience, unity, and cultural cohesion. It continues to be celebrated and remembered through oral traditions, festivals, and cultural practices among Eʋe people.

'Dotokpo' embodies the widespread belief of attributing supreme knowledge and wisdom to the ancestors. In most Ghanaian societies, logic and reason are considered the preserve of both the young and old, but elders defer to ancestral knowledge, spirit mediumship, and divination to penetrate the unknown. In 'Dotokpo,' ancestral wisdom as embodied by the grandfather evidently triumphs over the narrator's initial naïveté and complacency. Spoken word poetry is fused with reasoning and terse philosophical logic. 'Dotokpo' is an intellectual call to arms, meant to awaken Africans to their centuries-old traditions, rites, customs, and sacred rituals to dislodge unproductive colonial teachings that mislead and disorient our current generation. The poem gives us a glimpse of Yom's longing to reconnect with his Eʋe cultural roots and his deep appreciation for seemingly 'discarded' traditions.

Figure 6. Nugbuitɔwo performing during Hogbetsotso festival, Anloga, Ghana, 2019. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Finding Our Way Back Home': Self-Decolonization through Cultural Awareness and Artistic Expression

Over the past decade, I have been on a similar decolonial quest to Yom's as exemplified in 'Dotokpo.' 'Finding my way' to Eʋe cultural roots has meant researching the arts of Eʋe Vodu religion and the cultural philosophies embedded within it. Of particular importance to me is reclaiming spiritual values that have been passed down from generation to generation through

indigenous pedagogies. Despite the fear and superstition that surrounds Vodu art in most urban Ghanaian communities, I was drawn to its awe-inspiring aesthetic qualities and its spiritual significance.

My research journey began by questioning Eʋe elders and shrine artists from an artistic perspective. I came to realize that Vodu art is not an assemblage of so-called 'idolatrous' artworks, but rather a complex system of knowledge and ancestral values that offers a unique perspective into African philosophy and Eʋe cultural heritage. Vodu art teaches us about the power of ancestors and the interconnectedness of nature and society, which has shaped my understanding of the world. Like Yom, who draws inspiration from Eʋe orality and ancestral knowledge, my personal engagement with Vodu art helped me to reclaim my identity and connected me to broader indigenous knowledge systems.

My immersion into Vodu aesthetics has exposed me to an endless supply of creative ideas and aesthetics influences I frequently experiment and explore to develop new creative expressions. My paintings have assumed more cultural significance ever since I reconnected with Eʋe cultural roots and spiritual beliefs. By incorporating elements of Vodu visual culture into my artwork, I am able to create unique aesthetic forms that are grounded in my own culture.

In this sense, Yom and I have both come to appreciate the richness and complexity of Eʋe culture and committed ourselves to sharing this knowledge with others, particularly the younger generation. In retrospect, I remember my encounter with Vodu art as a young teen during my high school days with a deep sense of appreciation and burning desire to re-educate myself, something which I recall in a previous text:

> 'This is authentic art, this is my culture, these are my people, this is where I come from, I'm a child of the Land, this is where I shall be buried when I join the ranks of the noble Ancestors, it would only be wise for me to begin my spiritual journey now' (Adjei 2019).

In Eʋe societies, children are tasked by society with transmitting culture for posterity. Hence, it is imperative for the older generation to foster cultural education, to guide the younger generation in a continuous cycle of education. It is quite common to see children being led publicly by elders during cultural performances such as festivals, funerary processions, and spiritual ceremonies. Elders are looked upon as knowledge holders who must guide young members of society.

Figure 7. Nugbuitɔwo seated in preparation for their performance at the Hogbetsotso festival, Anloga, 2019. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Like a prodigal child who lost his 'way home' (identity) and found it again through personal education and self-discovery, Yom is now concerned with the transmission of cultural education and mentoring the current and forthcoming generations of Africans. He strives to make them culturally aware and firmly rooted in their history and multilayered identities. Through this self-decolonizing process, Yom is realizing his grandfather's prophetic words about a young child growing into a future ancestor and fulfilling his life's task of becoming a 'Farmer of Culture.' Yom's autobiographical narrative and self-decolonizing approach employed in 'Dotokpo' emphasize personal experiences over dogma and subverts drab theoretical approaches to decolonization.

In his own words, Yom recounts how self-decolonization influenced his journey in art and culture as a poet:

> 'Self-decolonization and the awareness that comes with it gave me a perspective from which I was able to give birth to the *Alter Native* EP where through harnessing all the influences colonial and indigenous knowledge available to me I was able to present a piece of art which transcends the limitations of leaning too hard on one narrative or the other. Self-decolonization made it possible to present myself and thoughts from my indigenous self whilst transforming colonial effects into tools to our collective advantage' (2023, personal communication).[10]

Indeed, Yom's newfound sense of cultural awareness greatly influenced the rhythms in the poems on the EP. The cultural influences that shaped the verses on *Alter Native* span from all over the West African coast as well as the

diaspora. According to Yom, he intentionally crafted the EP as

'a cultural sound that encompasses elements of black African culture and music [while still] projecting a distinct cultural identity, the song "Dotokpo" the first song on the EP involves a conversation between my grandfather and I, where he makes a plea that I do not shirk my deep Eʋe roots in an attempt to tell my story, that I maintain my center amidst all the influences foreign and local which have affected my contemporaries and I over the years' (2023, personal communication).[11]

Heeding his grandfather's call, Yom blends West African and diasporan sounds with modern Ghanaian culture and personal narratives, reflecting his deep Eʋe roots and unique cultural identity.

Yom and I are not the only artists reclaiming neglected cultural values. Many other African artists, like for instance El Anatsui, Wiz Kudowor, or Peju Layiwola, have also relaunched their creative careers and developed their own unique aesthetic by incorporating artistic elements of cultural heritage into their work. The tendency to incorporate creative influences, cultural depth, authenticity, and rich layers of traditional value to their artistic expressions is quite evident.

The importance of indigenous creative practices to self-decolonization is

Figure 8. A young child poses in front of Tɔgbui Adzima Shrine wall in Klikor, Volta Region (2016). Mural by Shrine muralist Noble Kunyegbe. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 9. A group of German academics appreciating my artwork, Shaka's Military Reforms (130 cm x 175 cm, 2017) during an exhibition in Accra. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

further emphasized in an interview between Walter Mignolo and his fellow *Decolonization* editorial board member Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández. In this interview, Mignolo emphasized the importance of decolonial options and their integration into current political and cultural dynamics, highlighting the need for decolonial thinkers and practitioners to operate within complex power dynamics. He further elaborates on the range of options available to artists committed to decolonial work as they navigate contemporary art worlds shaped by competing norms and based on diverging epistemologies and conceptions of creation and sensory experience. He talks about indigenous conceptions of and approaches to creative work, suggesting that indigenous practices have a central role to play in how we deal with the colonial wound through decolonial healing (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014: 1). Yom's music operates in a similar decolonial aesthetic framework, blending contemplative stanzas, literary devices, indigenous influences from celebrated poets, and elements of traditional Ghanaian music.

'Here Comes Bebe Appetizing': Reframing Womanhood and Motherhood in Yom's Poetic Expressions

In exploring social issues on *Alter Native*, it is essential to engage with Yom's portrayals of womanhood and motherhood. An examination of the social dynamics of gender and familial relationships in Yom's work offers insights into the delicate balance between aesthetic expression, poetic license, and the potential for stereotypical representation. Yom's poems could be seen

as a catalyst for discussions about how contemporary African artists grapple with and reinterpret traditional gender roles in a rapidly changing world, contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender and representation in post-colonial societies.

For instance, 'Bebe,' a poem rich in sensual imagery and complex metaphors, requires a closer reading to discern its deeper sociocultural implications. An ode to the African woman, this poem constructs 'thought experiments' on seduction, lust, forbidden fantasies, and sensual pleasures. The erotic poem is softly spoken over rock-steady instrumentals performed by members of SenkuLive band. The sexual innuendos woven into the poem blend smoothly into the low tempo mood. Inspired by Barrington Levy's signature style, the chorus, sung by Villy, blends in smoothly:

> 'For there go bebe
> Inspiration advertising
> Metaphors perched on
> Plenty buttocks till by-standing masons
> And gaping locked jaws seem synonymous
>
> And so I must intervene with the shout of an *ayeekoo* in a hope that
> They may be released from the spell of Medusa in her waist beads
> Here comes bebe appetizing
> Walking to me like I was King [...]
> Longing for her soft skin literally rendered butter by shea [...]
> Bebe is a tease
> Like I was a village drunk and palm wine is what she sells [...]
> For bebe be killing me softly.'

Figure 10. Helen Appiah-Ampofo, Yom, and Villy interacting with the audience after listening to 'Bebe.' © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Bebe' reminds us that confessions are morally and erotically charged. 'Bebe' captures the sexual vulnerability of randy men attracted by the powerful charm of what Yom considers as an 'appetizing bebe' in all her glory, purity, and divine essence.

However, from a feminist perspective, it is essential to address concerns about the potential objectification of women and to explore the deeper cultural and decolonial contexts at play here. The poem, on its surface, is vulnerable to critique, as it appears to perpetuate stereotypical depictions of African women as mere 'objects' of sensual desire, reinforcing patriarchal views. Notwithstanding, a deeper interpretation could reveal a commentary on the complexities of gender dynamics in post-colonial African societies. By employing vivid, sensory imagery and metaphors, Yom portrays the African woman as an embodiment of strength and allure, but this portrayal also risks reducing her to an exoticized and eroticized figure. It is therefore crucial to juxtapose the image Yom draws with the broader backdrop of African storytelling traditions, where female characters often symbolize resilience, desire, cultural depth, and spiritual power.

From a decolonial context, despite Yom's strong desire to reconnect with his Eʋe culture, his references to Medusa in the poem 'Bebe' alludes to Western notions of beauty and desire connected to a figure from Greek mythology. Medusa is known for her enchanting beauty, with snakes for hair and an ability to turn men to stone with her gaze. While Medusa is widely perceived as a symbol of female power, charm, and danger, she is not quite associated with Ghanaian aesthetic standards of feminine beauty nor sensual attraction. Hence, Yom's use of Medusa as feminine aesthetic 'ideal' and a reference within the context of decolonial thought might be perceived as problematic by African literary critics (see Chinweizu et al. 1980).

Yet, other tracks on the album appear to be more nuanced autobiographical sketches of Yom's own life stories and personal struggles. 'Paa Joe' tells the story of a frustrated youth struggling with substance addiction, the pursuit of worldly pleasures, and identity crises—from the perspective of his mother. The solemn humming and retrospective lamentations at the beginning of 'Paa Joe' transition into the evocative stanza below:

> 'Paa Joe,
> You drink and you smoke that which makes chimneys choke
> And you dedicate your existence to frustrate and provoke.
> You've invoked the gods imbibed in the core of the yoke,
>
> Curses,
> Paa Joe,
> Curses,
> Descending on the top of your head.
> They've embossed the scalp of your head with footprints.

Whose sins do you bear?
Whose shame do you wear?

Worn out old folks like us can only see the promise the premise upon which we've raised you.
Yet it seems even compromise is at a price we cannot pry away from your hands.

You possess a purity Paa Joe,
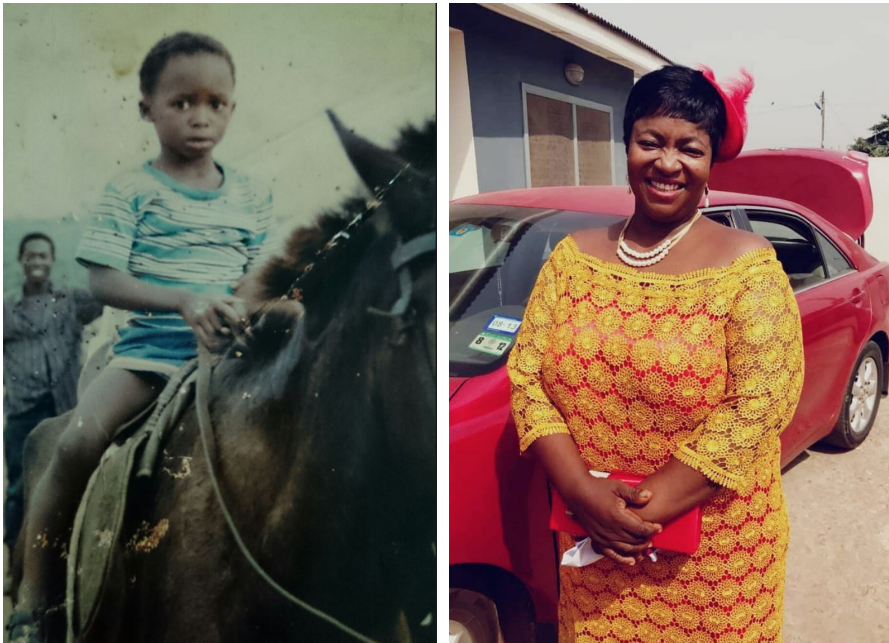A dangerously religious desire to attain immediate goals regardless of what they are.'

Figure 11. Left: A photo of Yom riding a horse in his childhood days. Right: Yom's mother, Mrs. Bernice. Yom shares the same birthday as his mother. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Paa Joe' is a poem that recounts the very familiar situation of a passionate plea from an African mother seeking to reason with her wayward child, perhaps misled by peer pressure and urban culture. After several attempts at a prim and proper upbringing, their deep relationship turns sour. In her pensive lamentations, she simply cannot comprehend how things went wrong. This leads her to reprimand and probe her son Paa Joe with a flurry of rhetorical questions and reminders of how they were both deeply connected by maternal love during his childhood days:

'Desecrating my home with a variety of bosoms and back sides Queen of Sheba couldn't comprehend
Shame on your wicked heart blackened by the soot of burned down reason [...]
A descendant of dragon turned snake spitting venom
You've turned my mind into a playground see-sawing in my cerebellum

Say something, don't leave me with nothing
"Paa Joe, say something."'

Despite his hedonistic pleasures and carefree spirit, Paa Joe expresses moral self-inquiry and remorse for his misguided actions. This self-revulsion eventually leads him to rely on motherly care and enduring love to save his ailing soul. Upon the repeated probe 'Paa Joe, say something,' Yom utters this pithy remark in the concluding verse of the poem:

'"Maa... I'm Hungry,"
"Maa... I'm Hungry."'

Yom's metaphor expresses his soul's thirst, not for nourishment per se, but for wisdom, vigor, love, and compassion from his own mother. These serve to nurture, guide, and realign his destiny to fulfill his life's true mission— being a poet and an artist. Here, Yom presents his audience with a glimpse of how a reckless rebellion morphs into a radical act of reconciliation, a return to the cradle to tap into the well of life and wisdom.

Despite Yom's dreary reflections, 'Paa Joe' blends melancholic jazz-style instrumentation with the hauntingly beautiful voice of Ghanaian singer Verony. Verony's harmonious crooning in the background envelopes the record in an air of sentimentality that mentally lingers long after hearing the poem.

Figure 12. Photoshoot promoting Yom's EP *Alter Native* on his Instagram page. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

In 'Paa Joe,' personal narrative, self-disclosure, and repetitive self-renunciation are presented as a means of escape from the narrator's physical and spiritual woes—'hunger,' 'thirst,' 'brain fag,'[12] 'physical exhaustion,' and 'remorse.' In his discussion of confession, Michel Foucault presents insights into how self-disclosure releases the burden of guilt from the mind of the confessant. For Foucault (1998: 61–2), confession is a powerful act of speech. It is a ritual act that involves both revealing oneself and facing a figure of authority who judges, guides, and potentially offers absolution. As Andreas Fejes points out, in Michel Foucault's work, 'confession does not specifically limit itself to the confession taking place in church, but it also signifies the most private and intimate relationships that we have with our lovers, family, friends, and with ourselves' (2013: 3).

In 'Paa Joe,' Yom clearly relies on maternal love, care, and guidance for eternal salvation, similar to the confessional path suggested by Foucault. In retrospect, Yom alludes to the fact that his personal journey into self-disclosure, self-decolonization, and cultural awareness has been a learning curve that enriched his life experience ever since he embarked on *Alter Native*:

> 'I have also learnt that expressing vulnerability or self-disclosure is more empowering than it is demeaning as it sets one free from the guilt of the past and emboldens the individual in taking up bigger tasks as the weight of regret and shame is finally left behind' (2023, personal communication).[13]

By using a mother figure as a narrator and witness to Paa Joe's confession, Yom implies that it is African *women* who are the authority figures able to judge young men, guide them, and ultimately free them from their shame and regret. More broadly, one might conclude that there are pros and cons to the fact that Yom's lyrics emphasize the personal and confessional. Sometimes this means that they are limited, for example, by a male perspective that objectifies women; but, on the other hand, this personal approach allows him to convey the moral stature of African women.

Poetry as Social Commentary

Yom is also heavily influenced by real life events and issues that occur within his immediate environment. In the song 'Sakawa,' Yom addresses several key issues linked to social vices like *Sakawa*.[14] He was cautious not to be judgmental about the scourge of *Sakawa* and the get-rich-quick schemes (e.g. internet fraud, romance scams, online identity theft) some Ghanaian youths of today indulge in. According to Yom, these people rely on ruse and guile as an 'escape route' out of poverty and hardship. The end eventually justifies the means, which is captured in this verse:

'"Damirifa due" to poverty [...]
Lately he swims in clarity
In his newfound future and its brightness.'

Archetypal images of trickery still creep into the social fabrics of Ghana and Nigeria as, for instance, in the form of *Sakawa*, 419 scams, or Yahoo scams. Traditionally, trickery as a tactic is deeply enshrined in West African storytelling traditions such as *Anansesem* among the Akans and *Ijapa* trickster tales among the Yorubas. Ananse, the archetypal trickster who embodies deception and manipulation, is either abhorred as a villain or elevated as a hero depending on the circumstances. In the verses of 'Sakawa,' Yom poses as a practical guide disclosing guarded 'street codes' employed by *Sakawa* 'strategists' and consummate manipulators, who have perfected Ananse's timeless mental coercion techniques into an 'exact science':

'Find a woman or a man in the West hopefully is depressed and hard pressed on finding love
You must go in to mine deep but do not let your mind scheme be exposed with a fixation on money
scratch at the crust
Gain her trust
Sugarcoat your words with honey

Let him propose
Pose from the posts of business for those who possess the dough
Say you're an African Prince
Whose family gold must be sold [...]
Or be a simple lover [...]

Soon she will wire funds to your ailing mother's plight
Or visa for your flight [...]
He can't wait to unleash his Ananse stories on the World Wide Web [...]

In two weeks she'll be smiling to the bank
She just sends a third of her savings to a fiancée Prince all the way in Ghana
To enable the sale of his gold for plenty more [...]

Nodding her head to music from her stereo as she types a reply to:
"I is love you"
She thinks his English seems pretty bad
But she is reassured by the stereotype.'

These lyrics draw deep influences from Ghanaian folktales. Yom's stories mirror such archetypal traits of mythical figures, which firmly connects his characters to a wide range of pertinent issues and common

personality traits we encounter in our daily lives within most contemporary societies. Sakawa reveals Yom's affinity to the grassroots in Ghanaian societies. He is treating impoverished young people with understanding, praising their creativity instead of blaming them for their situation; he is advocating for embracing cunning as a means to redistribute wealth back to Africa; he uses empathy and humor to draw in and empower listeners to critique injustice as well.

The last song on *Alter Native*, 'Somebody,' is a social critique masked as 'somebody's story.' This scathing critique specifically focuses on envy, prejudice, ethnocentrism, ethnic rivalry, and needless conflicts that stall development, social progress, and national unity. A fitting extract from the poem summarizes the premise of 'Somebody':

> 'If there is love in this country I don't feel it
> Mental mutilations muting a nation
> Eʋes and Ashantis locked in dispute
> While our towns remain shanty.'

Yom views art as an effective tool for decolonization because it requires artists to reshape their own minds, becoming a positive example for others:

> 'The great Fela Kuti once said that as an artist the whole idea about your environment must be represented in the music and in the arts, more or less documenting the times. [...] It is the responsibility of the artist to present the facts, varying perspectives, cause and effects of issues so as to trigger thought and reflection within the individual. [...] Self-decolonization when done right should place the artist in a role of assistance, [...] arming listeners and the general public with the tools by which they can begin to embark on their own journey towards self-decolonization' (2023, personal communication).[15]

Concluding Remarks

Yom Nfojoh's music is a powerful tool for liberation, decolonization, and social transformation. His music, storytelling, and spoken word poetry serve as a platform for critical self-reflection, self-care, and healing.

His narrative approach is an inspiration for others to embrace their many-layered identities in their search for self-determination. Yom's work draws on the power of self-reflection in the journey of decolonization, suggesting that understanding and challenging past colonial influences is crucial for personal and societal growth. He emphasizes the significance of staying connected to one's cultural heritage, showcasing how ancestral wisdom and traditions are vital in shaping identity and guiding future paths. Finally, through his confessional style, Yom teaches us that there is strength in vulnerability and that openly addressing personal and communal challenges can lead to healing and empowerment.

His record illustrates the power of artistic expression, particularly

how music and poetry can be effective mediums for expressing personal struggles and societal critiques, offering both catharsis as well as a platform for raising awareness. Often confronting societal issues, Yom's poetry tackles complex problems, confronting and critically engaging with phenomena like corruption or social injustice. Yom envisions art as a potent tool for decolonization, capable of fostering critical thinking and reflection in individuals.

This essay has elucidated how Yom's artistic expressions transcend the personal, becoming a vehicle for societal transformation and self-decolonization. In essence, Yom Nfojoh's work, as explored in this essay, serves as a profound journey of self-discovery, cultural introspection, and social critique, demonstrating the power of art to inspire change and self-transformation within a broader socio-cultural context.

In conclusion, both myself and Yom Nfojoh's creative journey illuminate a shared pathway towards self-decolonization through the arts, underscoring a vital commitment to reclaiming and redefining African identity. Yom's work, with its deep engagement with cultural narratives and social critique, mirrors my own artistic exploration, highlighting how poetry and music can be transformative tools in challenging the colonial aftershock and envisioning new futures. Together, our creative endeavors contribute significantly to the broader dialogue on self-decolonization, demonstrating the power of art to inspire self-reflection, critical thinking, and provoke societal change.

Figure 13. Yom Nfojoh at Ghana's Independence Square. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

1. Dotokpo means 'be quiet' in the Eʋe language.

2. The term 'Eurocentric' is used here as a concept rather than a geographic location; it covers the thoughts and practices of the Caucasian race.

3. Nationalism in this (African) context refers to advocacy of or support for political independence, identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion of the interests of other colonial nations. Anyone who adheres to this logic within this context I call a nationalist; this is radically different from the fascist political ideology in Europe and elsewhere.

4. The Eʋe people belong to an ethnic group primarily located in the Volta Region of Ghana, as well as in parts of Togo and Benin. They are known for their rich cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted in music, dance, textiles design, weaving, storytelling and Vodu art. The Eʋe have a complex social structure that places great importance on kinship and community, with a strong emphasis on collective responsibility and social cohesion. Their language, Eʋe, is part of the Gbe language group, and it plays a crucial role in preserving their cultural identity and oral traditions. Spirituality and religion also play significant roles in Eʋe culture, with indigenous beliefs playing an integral role, particularly in the veneration of ancestors and the practice of Vodu, which permeates various aspects of their daily life and community rituals.

5. Popular music groups that drew heavily on Afro-fusion tinged with musical influences from highlife, Afro-rock, Caribbean calypso, percussion and neo-traditional music with elements and practices of other popular music genres.

6. Asentawaa P (2022, 10 August) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.

7. Anonymous students (2022) Personal communication, text message, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.

8. The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) was the military government that ruled Ghana following a coup d'état on 31 December 1981. Led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, the PNDC regime was marked by a commitment to a radical and populist form of governance. The regime focused on anti-corruption measures and social justice, aiming to address the needs of the underprivileged in Ghanaian society. The PNDC stayed in power until 1992, when it laid the groundwork for a return to constitutional, democratic governance, leading to the establishment of the Fourth Republic of Ghana.

9. Like North Kaneshie and Sakumono, where Yom grew up in, both are suburbs of the Accra and Tema Metropolitan districts respectively.

10. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.

11. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.

12. See Ayonrinde OA et al. (2015) as well Ola BA et al. (2009).

13. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.

14. Sakawa is a popular term used in Ghana to describe a combination of modern cyber fraud tactics and traditional African rituals. The practice involves engaging in various forms of internet fraud, often targeted at foreigners, and is believed to be empowered or enhanced by ritualistic and spiritual practices. These rituals are thought to invoke mystical powers to aid in the success of the cyber fraud activities. Sakawa is not just a criminal enterprise but is also deeply embedded in the spiritual beliefs of its practitioners. For more information, see Oduro-Frimpong (2014).

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Facing Racism, Leaving Multiculturalism: Afro-Colombian, Black, Palenquero, and Raizal People's (In)visibilities in Colombian Museums

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Facing Racism, Leaving Multiculturalism: Afro-Colombian, Black, Palenquero and Raizal People's (In)visibilities in Colombian Museums

Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala

This imaginary guided tour gathers chronologically some of the ways Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquero, and Raizal communities or people in Colombia have appeared represented—visible and invisible—in Colombian museums between 1994 and 2023. I reflect on exhibitions (one of which I participated in), artworks, and books to show how a multicultural vision of the nation in museums has helped maintain a neutral memory that hides the dire consequences of the transatlantic slave trade among Afro-descendants. I also work to recompose a pathway for more radical, anti-racist, and reparative initiatives that tackle and question racism and racist stereotypes in museums and exhibitions, an endeavor that requires collective and collaborative actions between public and private institutions, involving Afro- and non-Afro-descendant scholars, artists, activists, curators, researchers, designers, and writers.

I invite the reader to approach this piece as if attending an imaginary guided tour of representations of Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquero, and Raizal communities or people in Colombian museums between 1994 and 2023.[1] I start this tour referring to the current state of these representations in exhibitions at the Museo Nacional de Colombia [National Museum of Colombia] in Bogotá, and relating them to an ongoing project called Museo Afro [Afro Museum], led by the Museo and the Ministry of Culture. Then the tour takes you backwards in time. The next stop is the 2008 exhibition *Velorios y Santos Vivos. Comunidades Negras, Afrocolombianas, Raizales y Palenqueras* [Wakes and Living Saints: Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero communities, from now on *Velorios*], which was on display from 21 August to 3 November at the Museo Nacional. This is my personal highlight because it was also my first job as research and curatorial assistant, and the main subject of my doctoral dissertation (González-Ayala, 2016). Subsequently, I move further back in time to describe and discuss another exhibition, a book, and the work of an artist that tackled racial stereotypes against Black and Afro-Colombian people. I finish the guided tour moving further into the past, to show exhibitions that were organized from the 1990s to the present and that have dealt with Afro-Colombian history, image, representations, and stereotypes in institutional contexts. In this imaginary

guided tour, I want to show you some ways to incorporate anti-racism and reparations in museums, which requires leaving aside multiculturalism.[2]

Let me begin with some historical context. In Colombia, like in other Latin American countries, the Spanish colony organized its population in a 'so-called caste society' (García et al. 2022: 28) that located exploited natives and enslaved Africans at the bottom and white Spanish people at the top. From the beginning of the 19th century on, post-independence, the Republic of Colombia's political rhetoric was built on a contradictory ideology, a 'foundational fiction' of *mestizaje* ('race' mixture) that helped elites to deal with an intrinsic dilemma in creating national sentiment: 'how to make the manifestly mixed character of the Colombian population compatible with the clearly white connotations of progress and modernity' (García et al. 2022: 40). The word *mestizo* translates broadly as 'mixed-race,' but the specific label 'white-mestizo' (*blanco-mestizo* in Spanish), in Colombia and other Latin American contexts,

> 'includes elite and middle-class people who are seen as or self-identify as white and also mestizos who are at the lighter end of the color spectrum and differentiate themselves socially and culturally from Indigenous and Black people and from darker-skinned working-class mestizos' (Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2022: 216).

After the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991 recognized the country as a 'pluriethnic' and 'multicultural' nation, the image and ideology of the country as *mestizo* was replaced, largely thanks to Indigenous and Black movements (García et al 2022: 42). From then on, there have been different attempts to include, reflect on, acknowledge, criticize, and teach the ways in which Afro-Colombian people have been part of Colombian history and culture. Art, curation, and exhibitions have contributed to that aim of a diversified national self-representation and opened space for anti-racism:

> 'Multiculturalism may in some scenarios be reduced to simple co-optation and appeasement, but in others it "opens up sociocultural arrangements to a more diverse set of habits"' (Goldberg 2008, cited in Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2022: 13).

Nevertheless, in her study of the Black middle class in Colombia, Mara Viveros, an Afro-mestiza professor of gender studies (2022) describes the effects of multiculturalism as 'precarious and individualized' (p. 118). She acknowledges some of its achievements, including more attention for, and discussion of, structural racism. This also includes affirmative action for Afro-descendants in universities and the creation and application of discriminatory laws against racism. But she states that neoliberal multiculturalism has not resulted in any meaningful redistribution of resources. For most Black people, living conditions have not improved, nor has their political autonomy been augmented.[3]

In this introduction to the guided tour, I want to make explicit

how the place where I was born, the place where I did my undergraduate studies, and my racialized appearance as well as other physical features have defined my place in Colombia's racialized social hierarchies. Thus, I provide an example of how geographic location and physical characteristics have affected, if not determined, my role and participation as a white-mestizo anthropologist, researcher, and curator in exhibitions. *Blanco-mestiza* is also the label others have used to refer to me—usually Afro-descendant people from social movements and members of the academy.

I was born and grew up in a town in the mountains, some 250 km southwest of Bogotá, where most people would self-identify as mestizo if ever asked to label their racial status or ethnicity. In Colombia, one's birthplace is one of the practical manifestations of the structural racism that some authors have termed racialized geography (Wade 1993), Andean-centrism, or Tropical-savagery (Arocha and Moreno 2007). Altitude and weather are linked to physical human traits in an 'imagined nation' (Múnera 2005) that has morally located civilization and lighter-skinned people in the highlands (where Bogotá is) and poverty, underdevelopment, and darker-skinned people in the warmer lowlands.[4]

I did my undergraduate studies at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá in anthropology, a discipline locally traditionally associated with researching and writing about Colombian indigenous people (Botero 2013), and, since the 1990s, about Black, Raizal, Palenquero, and Afro-Colombian communities (Restrepo 2013b), but that implicitly assumes that practitioners are not themselves from those communities. Nina de Friedemann (1984) called this exclusion a consequence of the invisibility of works by Black scholars and stereotyped nature of studies about Black people in Colombian anthropology. This has excluded Afro-Colombian anthropologists such as Aquiles Escalante, Manuel Zapata Olivella, and Rogerio Velásquez from the discipline's canon (Hurtado-Garcés 2020).

My first job as a research assistant, in 2008, consisted of making videos for the *Velorios* exhibition. From then on, museums became my research and practice field, and the way they include, exclude, or misrepresent different groups, particularly Afro-Colombians, became one of my main research interests. In this piece, I intend to share some of my findings, stressing the need for a more radical stand that turns the multicultural perspective on Afro-Colombian people in Colombian museums into a restorative and anti-racist endeavor. I will suggest some of the ways this could happen, involving both Afro and non-Afro-descendant people.

In addition to reading the essay, I invite you to visualize it as a picture 'not simply of what things looked like, but how things were given to be seen, how things were "shown" to knowledge or to power—two ways in which things became seeable' (Rajchman [1988], cited in Halpern 2014: 24). I attempt to disassemble how the Afro-Colombian, Black, Raizal and Palenquero communities have been seen in museums in Colombia, that is, how visibilities and invisibilities have accumulated, circulated, dispersed, and re-accumulated. Visibilities are not merely visual, states Orit Halpern in her

book *Beautiful Data* (2014):

> 'They are "'accumulations," "densities," "sites of production," "apparatuses," and "spaces"': Visibilities are accumulations of a density of multiple strategies, discourses, and bodies in particular assemblages at specific moments. [They] can be constituted through a range of tactics from the organization of space—both haptic and aural—to the use of statistics. [They are] sites of production constituting an assemblage of relationships, enunciations, epistemologies, and properties that render agents into objects of intervention for power' (p. 24).

Tour-guiding serves me as a narrative tool with which to dissect exhibitionary accumulations that make Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquero, and Raizal people visible as diverse members of the multicultural Colombian nation but invisible as authors and protagonists of their own representations in museums. It helps me to re-assemble them imaginatively. The tour is also a visibility, a space where 'representation, practice, technology accumulate' (p. 37), and an ethnographic narrative—one of the languages museums speak. This guided tour is of an imaginary exhibition of initiatives related to this subject that have been organized or talked about in Colombian museums to date. It is an attempt to build on what has been done before and use it from an anti-racist perspective. Let us start from the present.

Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquero, and Raizal people at the Museo Nacional (2023)

In the last year I have visited the Museo Nacional a few times. It is located in an old prison, the Panóptico [Panopticon], in the center of Colombia's capital, Bogotá, and it is one of the city's top tourist attractions after the Museo del Oro. My last visit made me remember an article by Claudia Mosquera Rosero-Labbé, published in 2007, where she stated that

> 'a permanent hall of Black and Raizal culture must be established in the National Museum of Colombia; this hall does not exist today in spite of the intentions expressed in the museum's Development Plan and of the initiative to create a committee dealing permanently with this delicate subject. [...] This committee must take ownership of the discussion about symbolic reparations from the Museo Nacional' (p. 254).[5]

I will address the issue around the committee later. For now, I would like to emphasize that the 'Development Plan' Mosquera Rosero-Labbé mentioned was probably the Museo's 'Strategic Plan 2001—2010,' which spoke about 'getting people interested' in the 'Afro' subject by giving that 'cultural identity' increased 'exposure,' 'dissemination,' and 'protection' and inviting Afro-Colombian 'participation' in cultural processes (p. 16) but made no reference to racism against or symbolic reparations for these groups:

'As far as other priorities of social development are concerned, the Museum's Strategic Plan is directed to carry out, within its field, [...] b) the provisions of Law 70 of 1993 [on Black communities] and of the 2002 CONPES Document 3169 'Policy for the Afro-Colombian population' inasmuch as it charges the Ministry of Culture with "orienting its activity towards exposing society and state institutions to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country; promoting the ethnic groups' participation in the National System of Culture's institutions; and contributing to strengthening, projecting, and protecting the cultural values of Afro-Colombians for the purpose of conserving, enriching, and disseminating their cultural identity"' (Museo Nacional de Colombia 2003: 16).

Today, there is no such 'permanent hall' dedicated to Afro-descendants at the Museo, but visitors and researchers will find several objects related to and made by these groups scattered throughout its collections and permanent exhibitions. For example, on the third floor, in the hall called Being and Making, visitors can see some of those objects:

Figure 1. In this photograph you see an installation about Afro-Colombian Buenaventura-born *maestro* Baudilio Cuama, a musician and an expert in making marimbas. Traditionally made along southern Colombia's Pacific coast, marimbas are used in the genre of music of the same name and also in *currulao*. The installation includes a life-size photograph of its maker, a marimba, Cuama's voice and other related objects, music, and sounds. © Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 2. If you follow on to the end of the Being and Making hall, you will find a painting by the recently deceased Colombian painter Fernando Botero, depicting two unnamed dark-skinned women's backs. © Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 3. In front of Botero's painting, in a glass case, a twentieth-century Chokwe mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo next to an archaeological object from the Calima culture. © Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 4. In another section of the same hall, a few objects referring to Afro-Colombian Cartagena-born writer Candelario Obeso and his work are exhibited, also in a glass case. © Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

If you go downstairs, to the second floor, more objects depicting or made by Afro-descendants are displayed:

Figure 5. In the hall named *Memory and Nation*, on a wall full of images, a few of them on screens, others in photographs, or in paintings, Afro-Colombian faces and bodies appear. One of them is called the *Mulata Cartagenera*, made by Colombian painter Enrique Grau in 1940. Seeing it evoked a memory: after the UN declared 2011 the International Year for People of African Descent, the Museo highlighted one piece monthly to commemorate this declaration. In March, the *Mulata* painting, and the unnamed young woman who posed for it, circulated in programming leaflets as the piece of the month. © Sofia Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Also, on the second floor, in the Being Territory hall, we can find an abbreviated version of Afro-Colombian artist Liliana Angulo's work *Un caso de reparación* [*A Case of Reparations*] (Angulo 2015). This piece exemplifies one potential way that archives can give cultural reparations: publicizing the names, provenance, and professions of enslaved Afro-descendants and those who enslaved them. Angulo created it during a residence researching the archives of the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid, Spain. It focuses on how the 1780s Botanical Expedition and its Spanish leader José Celestino Mutis benefited from the slave trade. Also, it makes visible the contributions of free and enslaved people of African descent as workers for the Expedition and authors of botanical drawings. Paradoxically, this piece stands juxtaposed with objects that emphasize Colombian 'cultural diversity,' hiding its powerful, provocative, and disruptive character. In this imaginary guided tour, I link to a video of the artist presenting and contextualizing her work,[6] and I ask you to use some time to watch, read, discuss, and reflect on Angulo's piece and on the importance of naming enslaved people—in contrast to Botero and Grau's anonymizing of their models.

Around the time of my last visit to the Museo, a travelling exhibition was open for three weeks on the ground floor in the Panopticon Workshops and Visible Storage hall. It helps me to show another way in which the presence of Afro-descendant people in this institution follows a multicultural vision of the nation. The exhibition's name was *Un Rebulú de Saberes para la Hermandad* [A Gathering of Knowledges for Brotherhood] and it showed a summarized version of the Museo Gastronómico del Chocó [Gastronomic Museum of Chocó].[7] The exhibition was organized and co-created with the Museo Afro project,[8] the Museo Nacional, and the Ministry of Culture. According to the Museo Gastronómico's creator and director, Diana Mosquera:

> 'This gathering of knowledges will come to Bogotá to build brotherhood, introducing people to Chocó Province's culture through its cuisine in order to counteract cultural homogenization in Colombia [...] We want the African diaspora's traditions and heritage to have a dignified place in the national narrative and, of course, in constructing the Museo Afro de Colombia' ('Un rebulú...' 2023).

Un Rebulú de Saberes para la Hermandad was set up by distributing objects and texts as if they were displayed in a home's kitchen and rooms. At the center of the exhibition, a dining table became a venue for talks and workshops that made the exhibition a 'living museum,' as director Mosquera describes it. Walking around this exhibition and hearing about the concept of a 'living museum,' I remembered a project that had taken place years ago, the exhibition *Velorios y Santos Vivos.*

I will now ask you to imagine that in front of you is a big table with books, leaflets, and headphone sets, surrounded by posters that refer to the projects I will describe, with touchscreens and tablets connected to the internet for you to explore related websites (when available), and chairs

for you to sit down, read, listen, and discuss.

Living ancestors project and *Velorios y santos vivos* (2006—2014)

I was hired in 2008 as a professional anthropologist to be a research assistant on the project Living Ancestors, which would become the temporary and then travelling exhibition *Velorios y santos vivos. Comunidades negras, afrocolombianas, raizales y palenqueras* [*Wakes and Living Saints: Black, Afro-Colombian, Palenquero and Raizal Communities*]. According to its catalogue, *Velorios* attempted to show 'the relationships that exist between the ancestors and living people, and between the ceremonies for Catholic saints and for the dead' (Ministerio de Cultura and Museo Nacional de Colombia 2008: 23). The temporary exhibition included representations or recreations of tombs for the dead and altars to celebrate the devotion for the Virgin Mary and Catholic saints.[9]

  This project emerged from a demand made by two scholars from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Claudia Mosquera Rosero-Labbé and Jaime Arocha. In 2005, they reached out to the Museo Nacional to propose creating the 'permanent hall' dedicated to Afro-Colombian people that Mosquera wrote about two years later. Since 2007, the Museo's Arts and History Curatorship hosted the project, with support from the Ministry of Culture. Fieldwork took place in groups usually composed of at least two anthropologists and a Black or Afro-Colombian leader. They collected objects and information in seven areas highly populated by Afro-Colombians. Museum staff, anthropologists and Afro-Colombian *sabedores* [wise people, literally 'people who know'] and altar 'architects' met regularly to produce the exhibition. This group of contributors, along with several other Afro-descendants from all around the country who visited and commented critically on the exhibitions, were probably the 'committee' that Mosquera Rosero-Labbé also wrote about in 2007. The temporary exhibition's website has been archived, should you wish to explore it.[10]

  Velorios's introductory text, next to its entrance, explained its intentions and how objects such as funerary and religious altars were organized in space, suggesting a co-existence between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' in funerary and Catholic rituals.[11] In this way, the exhibition identified 'traces of Africanness' (*huellas de africanía*) in Colombia. Coined by Nina de Friedemann, this concept is used to signify 'the cultural baggage that is submerged in enslaved diaspora Africans' iconographic subconscious. The traces become perceptible in their descendants' social organization, music, religiosity, speech, and carnival theatre as a result of processes of creation and resistance where reason and feeling have guided cultural improvisation' (de Friedemann 1997: 175); they are visible 'in works, decorations, dance, forms of organization, of territorial use, communication and so on' (de Friedemann and Espinosa 1993: 101). The text that hung on the wall stated:

Velorios y santos vivos is a landmark step towards including Africans and their Colombian descendants in the Museo Nacional's exhibitions and collections. It emerged from a proposal developed in consultation with Black community organizations in seven Colombian regions with the shared goal of making Afro-Colombian, Black, Palenquero, and Raizal people's contributions to the national identity visible.

In the exhibition, the profane and sacred areas show the ancestral dialogue that extends through the wake and the nine nights of the vigil. Around the funeral altar built in the house's living room, you can hear sacred prayers and chants. Meanwhile, in the back and front yards, people play dominoes games and tell legends. Nowadays, this traditional way of healing the pain is being replaced by cold visits to funeral parlors. The small autonomous farmers who own collective territories are almost extinct because of industrialized agriculture and mining, and also because of the war, which makes funeral rituals difficult and dilutes Afro-Colombian identity. These transformations will appear in the videos projected inside the profane space alongside other illustrations of the Africans from whom Black people descend.

At the center of the sacred area, Congo River Valley carvings celebrate the ancestors and offer a vision of the spirituality they embody. Next to them, three altars do the same: one honors the Lady of Carmel, who protects sailors in the South Pacific region; another one, Quibdó's patron saint San Pacho; and one is for Baby Jesus, who is worshipped in February by Afro-Colombians from Northern Cauca. The perimeter of the space, for its part, emphasizes the solidarity born in each stage of the funeral rites: agony, death, wake, burial, the nine nights, the last night, and the anniversary, and also in the moving ceremony for the dead to become living saints.'

Next to these introductory words, a few pictures showed examples of Afro-Colombian people in their front yards during wake ceremonies, along with an explanation about sacred-profane relations within the ceremony and their possible resemblance to African traditions. In the center of the 'profane' area, there were chairs and tables with some of the board games described, as well as a few books for on-site consultation that were related to the exhibition's content and history. It was an area where visitors could chat, sit down, and play with the board games and cards available, as it happens during the wakes that the exhibition portrayed. It was also the place that researchers in charge of the visitor study used to conduct interviews. Once they crossed over into the 'sacred' area, visitors could learn about the 'moving ceremony for the dead to become living saints.'

Figure 6. This picture of the exhibition's model shows how the hall was divided into the 'sacred' and 'profane' areas using a white curtain. But the exhibition as a whole was sacralized using texts, an opening ecumenical ceremony, and a special closing event led by an Afro-Colombian group of people. © Sofía Natalia Gonzalez Ayala, all rights reserved, used with permission.

On the threshold that led to the sacred space, visitors would find altars, objects, texts, videos, and pictures organized in 'stages' of the ritual defined for the exhibition: Agony, Death, Wake, Burial, the Nine Nights, the Last Night, Anniversary. There were also a few West African twentieth-century objects from the Museo's Bertrand Collection, which aimed to represent Afro-Colombians' ancestors. They were intended to link present-day orthodox and non-orthodox Catholic rituals with the pre-colonial memory, knowledge, and spirituality that survive as traces of Africanness. The *Velorios* hall as a whole was 'sacralized' in response to concerns expressed by consulted Afro-Colombians. On the right side of the exhibition's main entrance, next to three TV screens with headphones showing videos about the installation process and the opening blessing ceremony, hung a wall text that, reframing the 'profane' and 'sacred' distinction inside the hall, sacralized the space as a whole:

> You are about to enter a sacred space consisting of altars that have served to communicate with our ancestors. We have consecrated these to the unburied ancestors from San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina; Palenque de San Basilio; San José de Uré; Quibdó; Tumaco; Guapi; and the northern plains of Cauca Department.[12] We did this so that through prayers, chants, and respectful attitudes, we help them arrive where they perhaps could not, due to the armed conflict and prevailing violence which have prevented their relatives from doing the ceremonies you will learn about after crossing this threshold.

Big black words were distributed above the wall. They showed other names used in Colombia to refer to Afro-Colombians: renacientes, raizales, palenqueros, morenos, mulatos, cimarrones, libres, negros, afrocolombianos, niches, comunidades negras.[13] As I said before, thinking

of the 2023 exhibition *Un Rebulú de Saberes* as a living museum made me remember *Velorios*. This is because, apart from the objects, altars, images, and texts, during the three months the exhibition was open, the Museo Nacional organized several cultural, educational, and academic activities where Afro-descendants were protagonists. Also, because once the temporary exhibition finished, it continued to exist in the form of a travelling display. The Museo's Arts and History curator, another research assistant (also an anthropologist), and I selected objects, texts, and audiovisual material from the exhibition, including pictures of its highlights—eight assemblies of objects reconstructing funerary and patron saints' altars—and then printed them on 21 banners that constituted, along with other elements, its travelling version.[14] In 2009 and 2010, I was responsible for its itinerary. The exhibition's tour was a way of returning the research results to the people interviewed and photographed during fieldwork.

Since 2011, when I began my PhD at the University of Manchester (UK), I used Velorios' biography or 'behind the scenes' as my research focus. I followed on another PhD thesis where the Museo's Arts and History curator focused on visitors' interpretations of the temporary exhibition (Lleras 2011). She demonstrated the limits for the transformation of stereotypes that a multicultural view offers for a national museum: in most cases, visitors—most of them non-Afro-descendant—had their existing ideas about Afro-Colombians' exoticism reinforced. In fact, she realized the difficulties involved in 'representing a more critical multiculturalism and taking on the issue of representations of the painful past and reparation as serious matters' (Lleras 2011: 290).

Meanwhile, what was by then not only a curatorial but also a research project continued its life at the Museo. As I knew the travelling exhibition kept travelling around the country with a young Afro-Colombian woman in charge, I proposed that my PhD fieldwork consist of following them in 2012 and 2013 and staying on site while it was open, something I had not been able to do before. I also thought seeing its preparation and return process at the Museum would be interesting, while the curators worked on it there in between stops on its tour, and just hanging out at the Museo, which would imply spending time where I had worked for more than 3 years. My plan was to use audio-visual recording tools to distance myself from what seemed like just going back to my previous life. In fact, that year of 'fieldwork' in Colombia many times felt like *déjà vu*. I became what Mosse (2006) refers to as an 'insider ethnographer,' which meant I defamiliarized myself with the project I had been so involved with, noticing precisely what it had not included.

To share with you what I noticed, let us go back in time a bit, and recall Mosquera Rosero-Labbé's statements quoted above. They signaled a challenge to the Museo Nacional to provide reparations for Afro-descendants. This would mean exhibiting explicitly racialized stereotypes but, at the same time, using curatorial and design work to highlight and question racism, signaling how images, names and categories that are

produced and circulate in museums, art, and the media also produce and circulate racist stereotypes.

Curating stereotypes and racism in an exhibition, artworks, and a book (2006–2007)

In 2006, as the Living Ancestors project started, three related projects led by Afro-Colombian women tackled invisibility and stereotyping and showed the connections between current and historic racism. The first one was the exhibition *Viaje sin Mapa* [Travel without a Map]. The second was Liliana Angulo's artwork, which was first displayed in a mainstream art gallery in *Viaje sin Mapa*. The third one was a book about Afro-reparations which Mosquera Rosero-Labbé co-edited and co-curated, using some of Angulo's art pieces, as well as others included in *Viaje sin Mapa*.

Figure 7. Screenshots of Viaje sin mapa's leaflets or 'study guides' (Cristancho and Angola 2006).

Viaje sin Mapa opened in 2006 at the Casa de la Moneda [The Coin House], an art gallery located in the Luis Angel Arango Library's building in Bogotá's city centre.[15] This exhibition was co-curated by Mercedes Angola and Raúl Cristancho. Its title was inspired by Graham Greene's *Travel without maps*. In

the curatorial text she wrote about the exhibition, Angola (n.d.) explains how she got involved in the exhibition project and her views on the names and images that it dealt with:16she got involved in the exhibition project and her views on the names and images that it dealt with:[16]

> 'I began this journey in mid-2004, after Raúl Cristancho asked me why Afro-Colombian artists had no presence on Colombia's art scene. He proposed that I co-curate *Viaje sin mapa*. I became interested in his proposal, considering I am Afro-descendant and a teacher and artist at the Universidad Nacional's Fine Arts School, because it articulated several questions: Why have these artists not been made visible in national art institutions? Why is there so little research, statements, or debates around representations of the Afro in Colombian art? That makes it impossible to name relevant Afro-Colombian artists' (Angola n.d.: 1).
>
> '*Viaje sin mapa* raises questions and initiates a debate about the invisibility of Afro representations in the art field. It signals the existence of diverse repertoires of representation, which has been named and built historically as 'Black' and currently as 'Afro' in Colombia. Such representations, including the ones in this exhibition and others, must be made known and publicized, departing from institutionalized stereotypes and traditions. The field of artistic and visual practices is a favorable territory to open up the configuration of new representations. These will dynamize and activate processes and policies in the fields of social life and the institution of art' (Angola n.d.: 8).

That lack of presence and visibility can be understood as a form of racism, and thus this exhibition, as anti-racist. It included works by Fabio Melecio Palacios, Martha Posso Rosero, Fernando Mercado, Javier Mojica Madera, and Aníbal Moreno, among other Afro-Colombian and Black artists that curator Angola talked about. *Viaje sin Mapa* also presented Liliana Angulo, whose early work reflected on and decomposed categories like 'Black' and 'Afro,' used to refer at the same time to identities and racial and racist images and words.

Angulo refers to her early work as 'photograph-sculptures' that relate to her 'own image and [her] racial identity as a Black person born in Bogotá,' in the highlands, counter to where Colombia's racialized geography would locate a Black person's birthplace and home. These works, like *Viaje sin Mapa,* dealt with 'stereotypes and representations of the Afro.' They were the product of her investigations into 'the word black and the identity associated to that word.' For example, in her early self-portraits in the series *A Black is a Black* [*Un negro es un negro*], she donned black face paint and 'deformed' her face with different objects. This was an experiment that she likened to an act of affirmation of the idea of wanting to be 'blacker' (*más negra*) (Banrepcultural 2010).
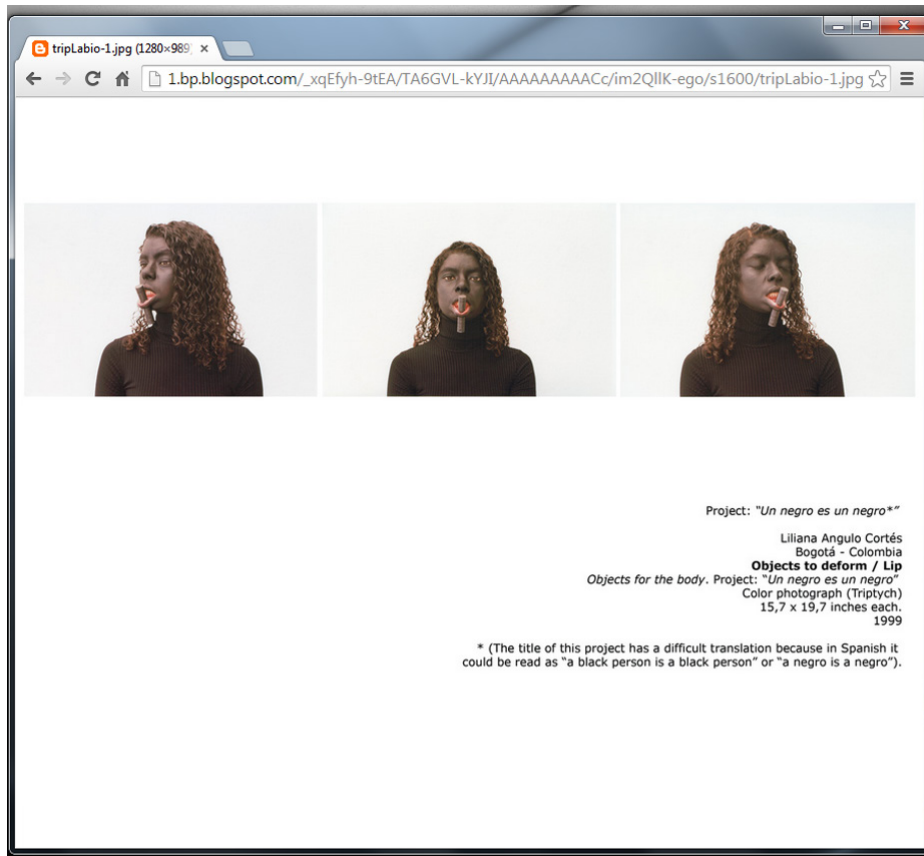
Figure 8. Screenshot of *Un negro es un negro* (see explanation under * in image) on Angulo's blog *Negrícolas*, a neologism that plays with the word 'negro' (black) adding to it the suffix –*cola*, 'one who cultivates or inhabits.' It can thus be translated as 'B/blackness-dweller' or 'B/blackness farmer.'

A later work, *Negra Menta*, consists of photographs of a woman whose 'natural' skin colour we do not know. She poses disguised as cartoon character *Negra Nieves*. In this work, Angulo conflates a stereotypical name (the word '*negramenta*') with a stereotypical image (a drawing of *Negra Nieves*), signaling both the textual and visual aspect of a racial stereotype (Angulo 2010).

> *Negramenta* is a pejorative word used in Colombia to refer to black people in general. The name of the series 'Negra Menta' [Black Mint] is a play on words to refer to the original term and also to the character of Negra Nieves [Snow Black], which is pun on 'Blanca Nieves,' the name in Spanish for the Grimm Brothers' character, Snow White (Angulo 2010).
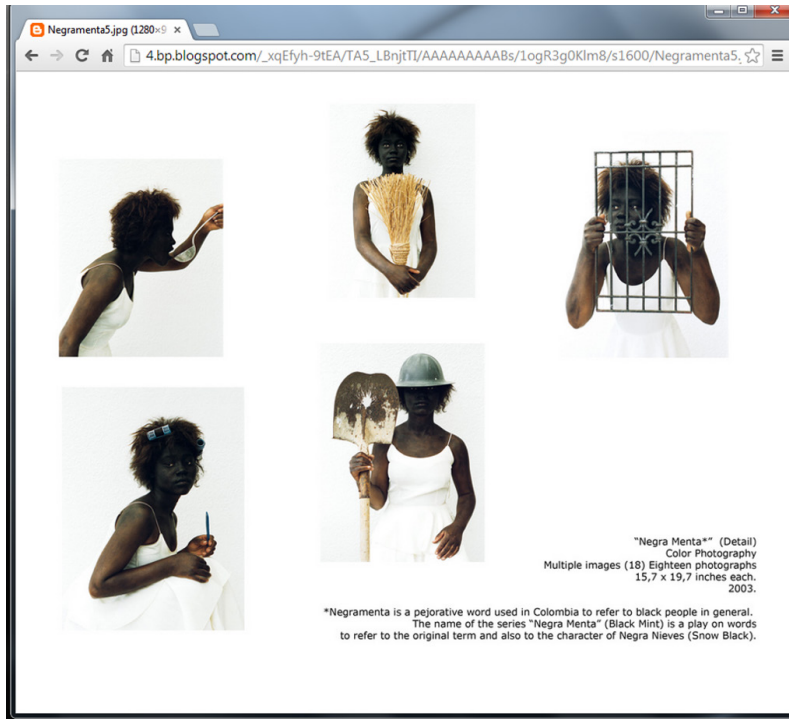
Figure 9. A screenshot of Angulo's piece *Negra Menta* on the *Negricolas* website.

Figure 10. This screenshot shows three examples from the cartoon *Negra Nieves*, which inspired her piece *Negra Menta*. She references the cartoon's author, but she also labels the selection as hers, appropriating it. From left to right, the cartoons' captions read: 'I want to earn a living by the sweat of your brow,' 'my ignorance is perfet! [sic],' and 'I've got anthropological angst…'.

In 2007 Angulo participated in a public conversation during an art festival in Medellín, the second biggest city in Colombia, where she spoke about *Negra Nieves* and *Negra Menta* (Angulo 2007). She explained how she intended to use photography as a means to affirm and re-signify Afro-descendants' racially stereotyped presence in the media, and to acknowledge their difficult situation working in big cities, like Bogotá:

> 'When I was a kid, [Nieves] attracted me a lot because Black people were not really present in the media... I wondered if the person who created it was Afro or not. Later on, I found out she was not [...] When Consuelo Lagos created her, [Nieves] was a domestic worker and Consuelo Lagos used her to talk about current news, as she does today. Although [Nieves] was portrayed as ignorant and clumsy, she could see things that perhaps other people did not. [Lagos] got sued because she represented Black people in that way, and so Nieves turned into a philosophy student at the university. Nieves changed completely from the 90s until now. I began to work with this cartoon character after I met a girl who arrived to Bogotá from Tumaco [a port town on the Pacific coast with a high Afro population] to work as a babysitter and maid. She was about 15 years old at that time, and her name was Lorena. When she lived in Tumaco, she had a normal teenage life. [...] But in Bogotá she never leaves the house where she works, conforming to stereotypes that associate her with domestic service and keep her an outsider in the city, without enough tools to participate in many of the things that happen in this big city. [In Negra Menta's photographs,] her body is painted in black as an affirmation action and as a way to obtain the graphic qualities of the cartoon using color photography' (Angulo 2007).

Viaje sin Mapa and Angulo's work directly tackled racist stereotypes in ways that *Velorios* did not. But this direct exposure implied an interesting contradiction: while trying to question racial stereotypes, these circulated in a mainstream museum, leaving space open for reinforcing stereotypes and misinterpretations but also for new, difficult—but necessary—discussions.

In 2007, Angulo's work and of other artists in *Viaje sin Mapa*, were included in the book *Afro-reparaciones: Memorias de la esclavitud y justicia reparativa para negros, afrocolombianos y raizales* [*Afro-reparations: Memories of Slavery and Reparative Justice for Black, Afro-Colombian, and Raizal People*, henceforward *Afro-reparaciones*] (Mosquera Rosero-Labbé and Barcelós 2007). This book presented and discussed racism and racist stereotypes explicitly. At the same time, it put forward the subject of reparations for the descendants of African enslaved people in Colombia.

Figure 11. A screenshot of *Afro-reparaciones*' front cover, with one of the pictures from *Negra Menta*, which conflates slavery, racism, and a gender stereotype in one image.

Mosquera's insistence on a permanent hall serving as an 'act of reparation' coincides with the ideas showcased in *Afro-reparaciones*. On the one hand, this book is a source of information and analysis about the idea of reparations for Afro-descendant people, or Afro-reparations, brought to the Museo Nacional in 2005. On the other hand, it constitutes an attempt to combine images and text to present and discuss the issues included in the book—that is, what reparations are and how they must be provided in the Colombian context. At that moment, Mosquera and Arocha, the two scholars that had approached the Museo to propose the exhibition project, were leading a research group at the Universidad Nacional called the Grupo de Estudios Afrocolombianos [Group of Afro-Colombian Studies, GEA], of which I am now also a member. Mosquera's ideas on anti-racism and Afro-reparations joined the ethnographic and historical approach of 'traces of Africanness' and the Afro-Americanist focus that Jaime Arocha advocated.

Thus *Afro-reparaciones* is also an example of an 'accumulation,' in this case, of people, documents, and events. But 'accumulation' here is also a synonym of 'curatorial work' [*curaduría*] accredited in the book's legal page to its designer and to Mosquera (Mosquera Rosero-Labbé and Barcelós 2007: 4). It reveals a network of authors that would connect with *Velorios* later on, from academic and non-academic backgrounds

(historians, anthropologists, journalists, sociologists, intellectual leaders of the Afro-Colombian social movement, statisticians, and artists), who dealt with subjects (gold mining, education, Black organizations) and places (Palenque, Bojayá, Northern Cauca, San Andrés, and Providencia) related to Black, Raizal, Palenquero, and Afro-Colombian populations.[17] Some of the volume's contributors were included in the list of people who would make a 'critical visit' to the Museo Nacional's exhibits in 2006 and 2007, and some of them would go on to write articles for *Velorios*'s catalogue. As I will now show, their work involved not only text editing, but also very specific choices regarding the selection, composition, and display of images in relation to text.

The book included Mosquera's article 'Reparations for Black, Afro-Colombian and Raizal people as rescued from the Transatlantic Slave Trade and exiled by the war in Colombia' (Mosquera Rosero-Labbé 2007). There, she elaborates a forceful argument about the need for the Colombian State to carry out reparations and affirmative action with an ethnic-racial perspective, and 'deep visibility.' The tone of her writing is provocative, denunciatory, and discomforting. Mosquera states that it was during the 2001 Durban Conference that the question of reparations was posed.[18] She affirms that Colombia, as one of the countries where members of the African Diaspora live in the present, is committed to complying with the Durban Conference declaration. In spite of this, it has not carried out actions to fulfill this commitment. She locates herself as belonging to a group of 'activist intellectuals who maintain that the descendants of enslaved Africans brought through the transatlantic slave trade to Nueva Granada are a subalternized group to which the current Colombian State must give reparations' (Mosquera Rosero-Labbé 2007: 231).[19]

In Mosquera's view, this relates to the continuity between historic and present-day racisms and to the creation of a racialized geography. Also, to how the Colombian State has safeguarded a 'neutral national memory,' when this memory is in fact non-unique, plural, heterogeneous, contradictory and 'diverse,' and how the State remains silent about the role of slavery in its constitution and history. In her article, words challenge the 'neutral' national memory by discussing the relationships between slavery, racism, and discrimination towards Afro-Colombian people. Likewise, the images in the book make those issues *visible* by showing the way those people and issues look. It includes images of small drawings of the slave ships the *Aurora*, *Brookes*, and *Vigilante* inserted between each of the 31 articles that compose the book. Images by Afro-Colombian and non Afro-Colombian photographers, artists, and anthropologists show Afro-descendants from all around the country.

Foto: Liliana Angulo Cortés

Capítulo 3
Reparaciones desde el conflicto armado interno colombiano

Figure 12. In the screenshot to the left you can see one of the seven pictures chosen to mark the book's main sections and chapters, part of Liliana Angulo's photographic series *Negra Menta*. Next to it, the chapter's title: 'Reparations from the Colombian internal armed conflict.'

Foto: Jesús Abad Colorado

Bojayá: entre el miedo y los medios

Aída Carolina Lancheros Ruiz
Julián Andrés Rincón Ortiz

Resumen

Esta crónica recoge la historia de la confrontación armada vivida recientemente en Bojayá, Chocó (Colombia), que dejó un saldo importante de muertos de la población afrodescendiente y una serie interminable de historias relacionadas con el miedo y la desolación que produce la guerra. El documento mostrará diferentes escenarios en los que se vivieron los momentos previos a la confrontación, su desarrollo mismo y sus trágicas consecuencias. Al final develará imágenes de la guerra y de las heridas que abre.

Palabras clave: paramilitares, guerrilla, iglesia, ejército, confrontación., comunidad, autonomía, violencia

Figure 13. In the screenshot to the left, Jesús Abad Colorado's picture introduces the following chapter. Colorado is a photographer who has documented the war in Colombia for several years. The article, 'Bojayá: between fear and the media,' was written by two journalists and is about a massacre that took place in 2002 in Bojayá, a small town in Chocó, near the Pacific coast, with a high Afro-Colombian population. 119 civilians were killed. The state's ongoing neglect of the town and the region is a historic consequence of slavery, and it made this population more vulnerable to the violence produced by the armed conflict. It is thus a manifestation of structural racism.

Foto: Martha Posso Rosero

Conocimientos ancestrales amenazados y destierro prorrogado: la encrucijada de los afrocolombianos

SANTIAGO ARBOLEDA QUIÑONEZ

Resumen

Este artículo propone la noción de "desterrado" como alternativa a las nociones de "emigrante" y "desplazado", que han hecho carrera en las ciencias sociales. Ésta permite una restauración epistémica de proyección prolongada con base en la cual se enfatiza la importancia central de los conocimientos construidos por los afrocolombianos, estrechamente vinculados a la riqueza natural de sus entornos ancestrales, en una defensa radical de la vida.

Palabras clave: afrocolombianos, desplazados, emigrantes, desterrados, región Pacífica, conocimientos ancestrales

Figure 14: Another picture, by Martha Posso Rosero, shows some children in front of a *zotea*, a platform used by women in Colombia's Pacific region to grow plants for cooking and medicine. This is one of the traces of Africanness that *Velorios* attempted to portray as both very valuable and endangered: valuable, because these *zoteas* host part of the post-birth ritual called *ombligada*,[20] which Afro-Americanist literature links to customs from West and Central Africa and identifies as a 'trace of Africanness'; endangered, because of the armed conflict that displaces and disperses people from this region.

Molano, Alfredo. 2001. *Desterrados. Crónicas del desarraigo*. Bogotá, El Áncora.

Mora Osejo, Luis Eduardo y Fals Borda, Orlando. 2002. *La superación del eurocentrismo. Enriquecimiento del saber sistémico y endógeno sobre nuestro contexto tropical*. Bogotá, Guadalupe.

Obeso, Candelario. 1988. *Cantos populares de mi tierra*. Bogotá, El Áncora.

Pardo, Mauricio (ed.). 2001. *Acción colectiva, Estado y etnicidad en el Pacífico colombiano*. Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e historia (Icanh) – Colciencias.

Quijano, Aníbal. 2000. "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina": 201-245, en Edgardo Lander, *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires, Clacso-Unesco.

Romero, Mario Diego. 2002. *Sociedades negras en la Costa Pacífica del Valle del Cauca durante los siglos XIX-XX*. Cali, Colección de autores vallecaucanos, Gobernación del Valle.

Sábato, Ernesto. 2000. *La resistencia*. Buenos Aires, Seix Barral.

Villa, Willian. 1988. "Movimiento social de comunidades Negras en el Pacífico Colombiano. La construcción de una noción de territorio y región":431-449, en Adriana Maya, *Geografía humana de Colombia. Los Afrocolombianos*. Tomo VI, Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Cultura Hispánica.

Walsh, Catherine. 2002. " La re-articulación de subjetividades políticas y diferencia colonial en Ecuador: reflexiones sobre el capitalismo y las geopolíticas del conocimiento":175-214, en Catherine Walsh et al, *Indisciplinar las ciencias sociales. Geopolíticas del conocimiento y colonialidad del poder. Perspectivas desde lo andino*, Quito, UASB/Abya Yala.

West, Roberto C. 2000[1957]. *Las tierras bajas del Pacífico colombiano*. Bogotá, ICANH.

Zapata Olivella, Manuel. 1997. *La rebelión de los genes. El mestizaje americano en la sociedad futura*. Bogotá, Altamira.

Conocimientos ancestrales amenazados y destierro prorrogado...

Figure 15. The last page of the article is followed by one almost empty. At its bottom is a small reproduction of a slave ship.

Barcos Negreros
[Slave ships].

Aurora

Brooks

Vigilante
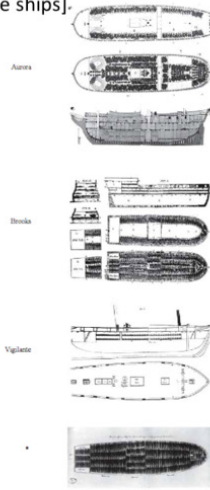
The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Data Base on Cd-rom. 2000 David Eltis, Stephen D.
Behrendt, David Richarson, Herbert S. Klein. Cambridge University Press.
"Archivo General de Indias, "Ingenios y Muestras", 66.

Figure 16. No explanation is offered for the small boats until the book's final pages, as if replying to the *Negra Menta* piece on the front cover: they are *barcos negreros*, slave ships.

In sum, *Afro-reparaciones* shows and discusses two of the subjects that were forcefully advocated by Mosquera and Arocha when they first approached the museum in the mid-2000s: the transatlantic slave trade and the recent armed conflicts, and the consequences of both for Afro-Colombian people in the present. It does this using images that confront us with stereotypes, horror, and beauty, and texts that name people and call racism by its name. For the last section of this guided tour, I invite you to imagine what it would mean and require to put together *Velorios, Viaje sin Mapa, Negra Menta, Un negro es un negro*, and *Afro-reparaciones*.

It is time to face racism, become anti-racist, and set multiculturalism aside (1994—2023)

Today's visitors at the Museo Nacional will find representations of Afro-descendant people in its permanent exhibitions through installations, sculptures, photographs, paintings, sounds, and texts. This is done using artistic, historical, and ethnographic pieces from its collections and elsewhere. Some of these pieces were made or authored by Afro-descendants. Nevertheless, they are presented to the Museo's visitors following a multicultural narrative that portrays and organizes Colombia's history under categories such as 'Memory and Nation,' 'Being and Doing,' and 'Being Territory.' These labels remind us of the 'neutral national memory' that Mosquera denounced in 2007 and that *Velorios* questioned, following an anti-racist path that had already been opened.

The last part of this guided tour describes this path, using a

chronology as a means to accumulate experiences that might sometimes appear dispersed, disconnected, or unaware of each other. It refers to exhibitions and other events that have attempted to deal with lacking and inadequate Afro-Colombian representation in museums, and the limitations that a multicultural narrative entails for this endeavor. It enumerates a network of people and institutions that have proposed and gathered subjects, objects, and names in exhibitions, museums, and related events regarding Afro-descendants' history, artistic practices, and ethnography. It also shows a solid body of institutional, museological, historical, and artistic knowledge that keeps growing today.

In 1994, three years after the 1991 Multicultural Constitution, historian Adriana Maya wrote a 'Museum script about Afro-Colombian communities' (Maya 1994) for the Museo Nacional. This script proposed that curators 'include in the south hall on the first floor of the Museo—called "encounter of cultures"—the ethno-history and the contribution of Africans and their descendants to the construction of the nation' (p. 2). That year, the Museo Nacional opened three refurbished halls to the public with the exhibition *Milenios de diversidad* [*Millenia of Diversity*]. In that exhibit, it displayed the 'contributions' of 'millennial cultures' from 12,000 years ago to the present day. But although one of these halls was dedicated to the ethnography of 'indigenous and Afro-American societies' (Sierra 1994), no mention of Maya's proposal was included. Seven years later, the 6th Annual History Conference held at the Museo Nacional dealt with the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Colombia. Artist Beatriz González, then the Museo's Arts and History Curator, gave a presentation that was later published as 'Images of Black people in the collections of official institutions' (González 2003). Also in 2001, most of the exhibits that had been inaugurated as *Millennia of Diversity* were removed.

Now we move to the institution that hosted *Viaje sin Mapa* in Bogotá, the Banco de la República and its Museo del Oro. In 2003, historian Adriana Maya there spearheaded the temporary exhibition *Comunidades afrocolombianas: Legado y presencia* [*Afro-Colombian Communities: Legacy and Presence*],[21] possibly finding the space she had not encountered for her 1994's 'Museum script.' Her collaborators included Afro-Colombian and non-Afro-Colombian scholars such as Peter Wade (one of the authors referenced for this guided tour), Dolcey Romero, Orián Jiménez, and Martha Luz Machado, also a member of the Group of Afro-Colombian Studies who researched the African pieces included in *Velorios*. These last two published articles in *Afro-reparaciones* too.

In 2006, the same year *Viaje sin Mapa* was inaugurated, the *40 Salón Nacional de Artistas, 11 Salones Regionales de Artistas* [*40th National Salon of Artists: 11 Regional Halls*] took place. It was an art exhibition organized by the Ministry of Culture that included a section for artists from Colombia's Pacific coast and focused on Afro-Colombian communities and traditional mining practices. Its curatorial team included Afro-Colombian artists and scholars from Quibdó (Ministerio de Cultura 2006).

In 2013, five years after *Velorios* opened in Bogotá, the exhibition *Mandinga Sea: Africa en Antioquia,* co-curated by historian Adriana Maya and Raúl Cristancho (co-curator, with Angola, of *Viaje sin Mapa*), opened at Antioquia Museum in Medellín. That exhibition combined artistic and historical approaches to show the current and historical presence of Afro-Colombian people in Antioquia province.

Also in 2013, artist and curator Mercedes Angola joined the Togolese scholar Maguemati Wagbou to continue her investigations on the non-stereotypical use of images in exhibitions. They co-curated the photographic exhibition *Presencia Negra en Bogotá: Décadas 1940, 1950 y 1960* [*Black Presence in Bogotá: the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s*]. It took place at the Claustro de San Agustín Museum, which belongs to the Universidad Nacional (where both were lecturers), and portrayed the experience of Black Colombians who moved to Bogotá from all around the country in those decades ('Presencia Negra en...' 2013).

Then, in 2018, *A bordo de un navío esclavista, La Marie-Séraphique* [*On Board a Slave Ship: the Marie-Séraphique*] was opened at the Museo del Oro in association with the History Museum of Nantes, France, reconstructing how France used that ship to traffic enslaved people in the eighteenth century. But its curatorial team included little reference as to how the Spanish slave trade took place. Possibly, they were unaware of the work historian Maya had done for the Museo del Oro in 2003 and for the Museo Nacional in 1994, or of the way slave ships were displayed in *Afro-reparaciones*.

In 2023, the exhibition *Retratos imaginados* [*Imagined Portraits*] opened in a small hall at the Universidad del Rosario, a private university in Bogotá. It resulted from a research project led by two scholars from that institution. *Retratos* exhibited a set of portraits made by AI using archival information about the university's participation in the slave trade (Universidad del Rosario 2023). This exhibition was associated with *Una línea de inventario* [*An Inventory Line*], a play written and staged by Diokaju, an Afro-Colombian actors' collective who brought to life the enslaved people *Retratos imaginados* portrayed. At the end of the year, a small exhibit in the same venue displayed *Solo cicatrices* [*Only Scars*], an installation that reflects on the scars that slave owners and slavery left on enslaved people, by Afro-Colombian artist Fabio Melecio Palacios. He also participated in the *Viaje sin Mapa* and *Mandinga Sea* exhibitions. I wonder what it would be like to place these last three projects next to *Un caso de reparación* (Angulo 2015), the forementioned installation on archival reparations you can find today on the Museo Nacional's second floor.

For the Museo Nacional and other museums to be reparative and anti-racist, their exhibitions must deal with difficult subjects such as violence, death, sacrality, and stereotypes. They must learn from the research, design, curatorial, and participatory methodologies that public and private institutions have already put in place. Afro-descendants must participate as the curators, researchers, protagonists, and authors of their

own writings, artworks, and images. But this cannot be an individual effort. In order to leave behind 'institutionalized stereotypes and traditions' (Angola n.d.), public and private institutions such as museums, archives, and universities need to work together.

The exhibitions, book, and artworks I have discussed in this imaginary guided tour bring together creative, respectful, and provocative attempts to deal with difficult subjects. They advance what that Afro-reparative permanent hall for Afro-descendants might accumulate at the Museo Nacional. They discuss and show slavery, death, racist stereotypes, displaced and stigmatized spirituality, violence, and the erasure of Afro-Colombians. They contain the work of Afro-Colombian and white-mestizo scholars, researchers, *sabedores*, and artists that have produced 'diverse sets of habits' (Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2022) and have opened space for reparation in multicultural contexts. This imaginary guided tour has also been an imagined encounter, a *rebulú* (gathering) of Afro-Colombian and white-mestizo people (and people who prefer another or no labels).

I am a frequent museum visitor, and one of my favorite ones is the Museo Nacional. Its exhibits elicit a combination of pleasure and satisfaction at seeing a well-cared-for museum space full of diverse representations of who we are as Colombians. Nevertheless, those feelings turn into suspicion when I compare the exhibitions with the actual conditions of inequality, poverty, and violence that still affect Afro-descendants more than the rest of the Colombian population. Moreno Figueroa and Wade (2022) also advocate for the powerful idea 'that anti-racism could address racism's structural dimensions in a more radical way' (p. 14). It is time for the Museo to accept publicly how it has historically contributed to producing and reproducing stereotypical images about Afro-Colombian people. It is also time for critical and public reflections on how its ethnography, archaeology, art, and history collections were gathered; for Black and indigenous people to work there as curators and conservators in charge of its collections, of its budgets and planning departments, or leading the education, programming, or communications teams.

We have learned that, since the 1990s, the logic of multiculturalism and acknowledgment of difference and diversity has ruled Colombian museums' strategic and development plans, budgets, and timelines. However, for reparation to take place, the damage done needs to be talked about openly and explicitly. Because 'we cannot change what we do not face' (Chevalier, Jennings and Phalen 2023: 273), museums need to ask first how they have contributed to the existence and reinforcement of racism, for example by protecting and disseminating what Mosquera Rosero-Labbé referred to as the 'neutral national memory' (2007). This imaginary guided tour has shown why multiculturalism must move forward—or step aside— to really open up space for restorative and anti-racist forms in museum and exhibition settings. It is about time.

1. 'Black' [*negro*] was a racial category inherited from the colonial period later used to allude to the local Black movement that emerged in the 1970s and also to the 'Black communities' [*comunidades negras*] that the 1991 constitution includes in Law 70. 'Afro-Colombian' [*afrocolombiano*] is a more recent name that acknowledges ancestry from African enslaved people and alludes to the word 'Afro-descendant.' 'Raizal' is an ethnic category that refers to the native people and diaspora from San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina Islands in the Caribbean Sea. 'Palenquero,' also an ethnic category, refers to the people from San Basilio de Palenque, a maroon enclave founded by African enslaved people in the colonial period near Cartagena, Bolívar, in the Caribbean continental region, and also to their diaspora and language. For readability I will include all four categories under the labels 'Afro-Colombian' or 'Afro-descendant.'

2. 'From about 1990, most countries in Latin America went through some variant of an official "multicultural turn," which opened space for talking about and recognizing cultural diversity and gave various rights to Indigenous and, to a lesser extent, Black minorities' (Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2022: 16).

3. The National Statistics Department estimates that in 2018 in Colombia, there were 4,671,160 Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero people, or 9.34 percent of the total population (DANE 2022). According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC 2020: 108), Colombia has the highest rate of poverty among Afro-descendant people in Latin America (41 percent). Colombia's Truth Clarification, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission's report on violence and damage against ethnic groups (Comisión de la verdad 2022) acknowledges that the violence produced by the armed conflict between guerrilla paramilitary groups and state armed forces in the 60 years before the 2016 Peace Agreement has disproportionally affected ethnic groups, which include Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero communities as part of a 'continuum of violences' against them that goes back to the sixteenth-century Spanish colony and the transatlantic slave trade.

4. These lowlands include regions, provinces, cities, and villages with higher numbers of Afro-descendant populations mentioned throughout the text. Most of them are located near Colombia's Pacific and Carribean coasts—Chocó, Cauca, Bolívar, Valle, Northern Cauca, San Andrés, the Providencia and Santa Catalina Islands, Bojayá, Buenaventura, Tumaco, Quibdó, Guapi, San José de Uré, and San Basilio de Palenque.

5. Translations from the Spanish, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

6. Currently this video is only available in Spanish at facebook.com/Museo.Independencia.Casa.del.Florero/videos/1083205915537003 (17/02/2024).

7. Chocó Province, located on Colombia's Pacific coast, has the highest percentage of Black and Afro-Colombian population in the country: 79 percent (DANE 2020: 25).

8. At the time I write this article, the Museo Afro project's curator is artist Liliana Angulo, the author of *Un Caso de Reparación*. Currently, the Museo Nacional hosts the project, but no physical final venue has been designed or established for it (see museoafro.gov.co, 24/10/2023).

9. In the Colombian Pacific region, people use the word *tumba* [tomb] to refer both to the place where a deceased person is buried and the altar arrangements built during funeral ceremonies or *velorios* [wakes]. The word *tumba* is also used to refer to the altars built for patron saints, and the word *velorio* is also used to refer to the feasts dedicated to patron saints.

10. web.archive.org/web/20220711022123/sinic.gov.co/sites/velorios/veloriospre.html (12/03/2024).

11. In this context, 'sacred' encompassed quiet, conventional, reserved protocols for commemorating death and Catholic saints. 'Profane,' on the other hand, meant unorthodox, explicitly emotional, and defiant procedures that question or disobey the Catholic Church's rules. The exhibition was divided

into two areas following that distinction, but the objects, altars, and practices exhibited combined both sacred and profane characteristics in the sense I just defined.

12. See note 4.

13. The words *renaciente* [renascent] and *libre* [free] are used in Colombia's Pacific region to refer to Black or Afro-Colombian people, by themselves and by others. *Libre* was a colonial category for people of African descent who were not slaves because their mother was free when they were conceived, or because they bought their own freedom (a process known as 'self-manumission') (Restrepo 2013a: 238; Arocha 2008: 12).

14. The travelling exhibition's website is also active while I write this article: museonacional.gov. co/sitio/Velorios_site/Index.html (24/10/2023). It is also possible to download the banners that circulated around the country museonacional.gov.co/sitio/Velorios_site/queviaja.html (24/10/2023).

15. This library and the gallery inside it, like the Museo del Oro, belong to the Cultural Division of the Banco de la República [Bank of the Republic], the Colombian central bank. The Banco's Cultural Division owns the two biggest art galleries in Bogotá: the Republican House [Casa Republicana] in the Luis Angel Arango Library, and the Museum of Art of the Bank of the Republic Miguel Urrutia just across the road in the colonial center of the city. The Museo del Oro was created in the beginning of the twentieth century and focuses on indigenous people because they produced many gold artefacts, but it does not show that enslaved and free Black people also did so.

16. Another version of this curatorial text is included in the exhibition catalogue (Angola and Cristancho 2006).

17. See note 4.

18. In 2001, the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban (South Africa) declared that 'slavery and the slave trade, are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences' (United Nations 2002: 16). This declaration also stated that the governments of countries involved in the trade should carry out actions to protect and compensate these present-day victims. Colombia is one of these countries.

19. The Viceroyalty of New Granada was the name of the Spanish Crown's territory in South America, part of which became the Republic of Colombia in the nineteenth century.

20. *The Comunidades afrocolombianas* exhibition catalog is available online at babel.banrepcultural. org/digital/collection/p17054coll18/id/406 (18/09/2023).

21. Arocha (1999) explains that in the Baudó River region, in Chocó province, *ombligada* consists of the burial of the umbilical cord and placenta, after birth takes place, under a seed. The tree that grows from that seed will become one's *ombligo* [navel]. Also, in the healing newborn's navel, the parents will add pulverized minerals, animals, or plants

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I have a PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media (University of Manchester, UK, 2016) and am a member of the Group of Afro-Colombian Studies at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (since 2008). I am a visual anthropologist, researcher, and curator, and occasionally a lecturer. I have participated in collaborative curatorial and museological projects, mainly

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Von Oswald M (2022) Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Leuven, Leuven University Press. ISBN 978-94-6270-310-0

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The February Journal, Berlin; Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; Herrmann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik / Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), Germany

Von Oswald M (2022) Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Leuven, Leuven University Press. ISBN 978-94-6270-310-0

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In the past years, museums that base their exhibitions on ethnographic collections have evolved from public sites of education, contemplation, and 'high culture' to sites of affective engagement with histories of violence and injustice. This development is driven by an emotional public debate that connects the everyday work routines carried out by museum staff with political actors and diverse publics.

In Germany, museums that rely largely on ethnographic collections have felt the resulting pressure immensely. Yet, Germany is unique among European countries in some aspects of the dynamics and debates around these institutions. Compared to the Netherlands and its museal moment of reckoning with colonial pasts, for instance, Germany is late to the party. This has to do with Germany's public commemoration of history and the dominant narratives of what it ought to performatively 'work through,' namely mainly its Nazi past (see Czollek 2023), which has led to an amnesia regarding German colonial history. Within the German landscape of research into heritage, provenance, restitution, and cultural dispossession, these two fields are currently somewhat in competition for funding as well as public recognition.

Recently, this political contradiction has come to the surface in the invocation of the German 'national interest' (*Staatsräson*, literally 'reason of state') to justify support for Israel. Domestically, the alarming vocabulary of the 'national interest' is playing out as an uncritical ban on public demonstrations that support Palestine and a censoring of critical voices (including within the academy) that speak out against Israel's large-scale killing of civilians in the Gaza Strip. This goes to show that incomplete repentance for German historical wrongdoings mainly translates into misdirected state doctrine at the expense of colonial victims. These same long-standing tensions around commemoration and national identity also shape Germany's engagement with colonially acquired things deemed 'cultural possessions' (*Kulturbesitz*, as in the 'Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz,' of which the Berlin Ethnological Museum is a part). Understanding the particularities of the German museum discourse is therefore a political obligation for German residents but also a highly interesting case study for an international readership interested in museum and heritage studies as well as the history of social and cultural anthropology.

Margareta von Oswald's (2022) book *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in*

Berlin is an ethnographic account of the processes of reckoning with emotional states evoked by the Berlin Ethnological Museum's colonial history. The book is based on von Oswald's fieldwork at the museum. To this day, ethnography and fieldwork constitute the core methods of social and cultural anthropology. As such, the book turns out to be a thoughtful meta-meditation on largely historical archives of material culture assembled by a discipline that has evolved through various critical turns. The resulting perspective of a contemporary anthropology that is concerned with decolonial practices, multiperspectival representation, and autoethnographic positionality stands in contrast to the lingering shame and unreconciled guilt—both national and disciplinary—associated with ethnographic museum collections. Often, these have unknown provenances, stem from contexts of injustice and violence, and tell the story of empire and coloniality.

Von Oswald's book is primarily interested in understanding processes at the Berlin Ethnological Museum that directly relate to Germany's intensified public debate around colonial history since 2013, the year the foundations were laid for the museum's new home in the Humboldt Forum building and when the book's account begins. On another level of analysis, however, it is perhaps also the process of the museum staff's catching up with the state of academic thought that von Oswald traces in her observations, comments, and detailed descriptions of an institution as it 'works through' the emotional and historical baggage of the collections that can be termed 'colonial.' After all, many of the curators working directly with these collections have been trained as social and cultural anthropologists (also labelled 'ethnologists' in Germany), and as such they are directly related to the disciplinary history of anthropology and the modern museum, as well as to colonial history, which has been formative for both. The entanglement of museum collections, national identity, and the academic discipline of 'ethnology' or social and cultural anthropology in the German context has previously been discussed by H. Glenn Penny (2002, 2019). Von Oswald's book provides a contemporary ethnographic study that augments these historical analyses.

The book will be a great source of information for museum researchers; decolonial scholars, and scholars interested in German colonial history, cultural politics in Berlin and Germany, the nature of institutions and public political debate; as well as anthropologists who deal with material culture and the history of anthropology as a discipline. It is written by a researcher who had access to the museum's internal functioning, the privilege of a key to the depot where 98% of the museum's collections are stored, and clearing to use the museum's catalogue, of which only a fraction is available to the general public via the museum's website. As such, this account is informed by a wealth of knowledge and observations that could only be acquired through deep access to and participation in the work of the museum. Von Oswald

frames the book with reflections on her positionality in the field, a timely method of ethnographic writing that helps to understand how emotional and affective states of intensity are not just matters of public debate but also directly affect museum staff and, for that matter, visiting researchers. By speaking out about how researching and writing about the museum affected her, the author conveys an honest sense of discomfort that helps readers to empathize with the state of conflict that embroils 'ethnological museums' these days.

Delving into the museum's world and taking readers to meet various staff members and see locations that normally remain behind the scenes, the book provides unique insights into how the museum became what it is now. It honors the individual contributions of former and current staff in shaping collection storage systems, displays, and discourse about the museum. At the same time, the book does not shy away from pointing out how processes intended to express a critical perspective on German colonial history in the new permanent display of the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt Forum largely failed to come to fruition over the past 15 years.

These observations are contextualized in a helpful overview of the activist engagement and protest over the Humboldt Forum project and the museum's involvement in it. A supplemental timeline points out the names and roles of political representatives in German federal and state cultural politics who shaped the format of the Humboldt Forum. These actors and their political agendas determined finances for museum work here, as well as appointments (and firings) of curators at 'ethnological museums' in Germany and Europe. Hereby, the book formulates a detailed critique of the museum's institutional functions as representative of national politics, academia, and research.

Without pointing a finger at individuals that work(ed) at the museum, the book conveys how the mechanism of feeling under attack produces zones on 'the inside' and 'the outsides' of such an institution, leading to a tightening of access and information around the collection. This is especially interesting since it is a phenomenon that has been observed by researchers of other museum-held ethnographic collections in various international locations over the same period of time that von Oswald's book covers. As von Oswald shows by relaying her own affects in the field and recounting the affective reactions of her interlocutors, matters that apparently belong to the past may be felt and experienced as something acutely personal when combined with public debate, but also with spaces and materialities dominated by the objects being debated.

To some degree, the discomfort and struggles that emerge are products of hierarchically structured institutions and can be understood as a systemic response to criticism. Von Oswald's ethnography draws a picture of how such reactions may look in a German context. Yet, her observations are by no means surprising or isolated finds, as shown, for example, in a recent paper by Clive Gray and Vikki McCall (2018),

who conducted a collaborative comparative study of different UK museums. Here, the authors also consider their affects and experiences as researchers within their field context, taking a view of museums as bureaucratically structured organizations. They write:

> 'Not only were there examples of top-down managerial control over access, but the organizational culture itself—with its formal and informal sets of rules—could also be a barrier to research. This often had added gender implications. For example, in one museum the male ground floor staff were careful never to talk to the female researcher, to the point of rudeness. Often as well when accessing senior (male) managers, this researcher was left waiting for hours to talk to them, including being left outside in the rain. These experiences emphasize the usefulness of an organizational focus for analysis as it helps us also understand that museums, as bureaucracies, also embody the prevailing cultural norms and social divisions of the societies within which they are located' (Gray and McCall 2018: 132).

In the context of heightened emotional debate in and around (ethnological) museums, such studies and observations are highly valuable, as they point out systemic issues related to the nature of museums as institutions. Museums as spaces of making heritage reflect national narratives of identity, functioning similarly to those larger systems. Using affect and positionality as frames of analysis in museum research can, then, help illuminate the effects of power in heritage contexts, placing the museums squarely at the center of the larger public debate about dealing with uncomfortable histories. Von Oswald's book also leaves hope that 'ethnological museums,' while in the line of fire, may possibly be places that help to transform ways of living together, to reconcile historical wounds, and to promote dialogue—although it constantly reminds its reader that the ancient bureaucratic processes of the museum as an institution never cease to hinder efforts towards such transformations.

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