

JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK

vol. XXXIX 1/2–2023

UN/DOING EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

Special Issue Guest Editor: Claudia Brunner

Published by:

Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik
an den österreichischen Universitäten

Journal für Entwicklungspolitik (JEP)
Austrian Journal of Development Studies

Publisher: Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik an den österreichischen Universitäten

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CHRISTINA PAULS

Performing Cracks in Public Memory: Undoing Epistemic Violence Through Artistic Interventions

ABSTRACT *The article explores the potentials and challenges of artistic interventions for undoing epistemic violence in public urban memory. Focusing on temporal imaginaries that underlie the politics of memory and their contestations, it problematises the coloniality of time materialised in practices of monumentalisation which inscribe epistemic violence onto public urban space. Focusing on the intervention 'Bismarck-Dekolonial', which addresses the world's largest monument to Otto von Bismarck, in Hamburg, the article applies an analytic framework of epistemic fissure that lays bare the cracks in the Western temporal imaginary and traces the complexities of 'doing' and 'undoing' epistemic violence.*

KEYWORDS *postcolonial urban activism, decolonial interventions, epistemic fissure, Bismarck, relational temporalities*

1. Introduction

Postcolonial urban activism is on the rise, challenging hegemonic narratives and silences surrounding the colonial past across metropolises – not only, but with increasing visibility – in former colonial centres in Europe and the United States. These narratives in question often heroise figures of colonial domination and monumentalise them in public urban spaces, either as granite or brass monuments, as namesakes for streets and public squares, or in the form of museums dedicated to their achievements. Far from just being haunting remnants of colonial violence, such symbols not only impose singular narratives about the past, but also regulate iden-

tity and belonging to urban spaces. With claims for the extensive decolonisation of public space, social and local movements such as the Decolonize!-alliance, the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD), as well as Black Lives Matter, have been at the forefront of the struggle, by strategising campaigns for the renaming of streets, or raising awareness through postcolonial walking tours. Such actions “are just the visible tip of an iceberg that hosts decades of traumatic experiences in states who continue to deny their responsibility in histories of brutality, enslavement, racism, disenfranchisement and, oblivion” (Mboro et al. 2021: 229).

Oblivion of colonial violence reveals the intricate relationship between power and historical narratives, including their racist colonial dimensions, and unveils both politics of memory and time as central instruments of modernity’s epistemic violence. Focusing on temporal imaginaries that underlie the politics of memory and their contestations, this article problematises the coloniality of time as materialised in practices of monumentalisation which inscribe epistemic violence onto public urban space. At its core, the article examines the potentials of artistic interventions in ‘cracking’ the Western temporal imaginary and making visible alternative temporal imaginaries. It traces the complexities of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ epistemic violence in the context of post-colonial urban memory and outlines some of the challenges posed by artistic interventions.

As an author, I have been involved in postcolonial urban activism both as activist and scholar. In this context, I was invited by curator Yolanda Gutiérrez to accompany the intervention, Bismarck-Dekolonial, in August 2021, which is part of a wider social struggle to decolonise the world’s largest monument of Otto von Bismarck, in Hamburg. She entrusted me with the task of disseminating the intervention in academia to bridge the gaps between the arts and critical social sciences. Grounded in decolonial theories and a methodological framework of activist-performative research, I draw from participant observation, informal conversations with the artists, and an interview with the curator, Yolanda Gutiérrez (2021a). The endeavour to chronicle an embodied artistic intervention for and into academia entails the risk of deforming its logic and reproducing epistemic violence by ‘pressing’ the living embodied interventions into pre-given theoretical frameworks. At the same time, it offers concrete potentials for

reflecting on strategies of *undoing* epistemic violence and contributing to debates on decolonisation. With this article, I attempt to balance these challenges and potentials with an attitude of humility.

2. Doing epistemic violence: Eurochronic time and collective memory

With the term modernity/coloniality (Vázquez 2011: 34), decolonial theories visibilise the simultaneity between two profoundly contradictory, but intimately intertwined processes of global history: the globalisation of Eurocentric modernity, which claims progress and development, reason, and humanism as its own (modernity), and its violent underside of colonisation, exploitation, dispossession, and the subjugation of the rest of the world (coloniality). To describe the relationship between the violence of coloniality and the narrative of modernity, Rolando Vázquez has introduced the “epistemic territory of modernity” (Vázquez 2011: 28), a spatial metaphor for the epistemological framework that holds modernity and coloniality together – the ‘slash’ between modernity/coloniality. At its borders, the ‘epistemic territory of modernity’ exercises border-securing and territory-expanding practices of epistemic violence (Vázquez 2011: 29), which also serve as the fabric that holds these two contradictory aspects together, enabling modernity to be maintained despite ongoing and intensifying coloniality.

Epistemic violence describes forms of violence that are being exercised in the creation, ordering, recognition, and dissemination of knowledge (Brunner 2020: 274). The epistemic territory of modernity exerts both forms of epistemic violence: at its borders, in relating to ‘different’ forms of knowledge, and, within its territory, as the normalised grammar of modern knowledge. While there are comprehensible arguments that, in principle, there is no outside to this territory, there is reason to assume that there are at least degrees of exteriority and a world beyond modernity. Only under the assumption of such exteriority does the argument hold that knowledge outside this territory is being translated ‘into’ the territory (Vázquez 2011: 35).

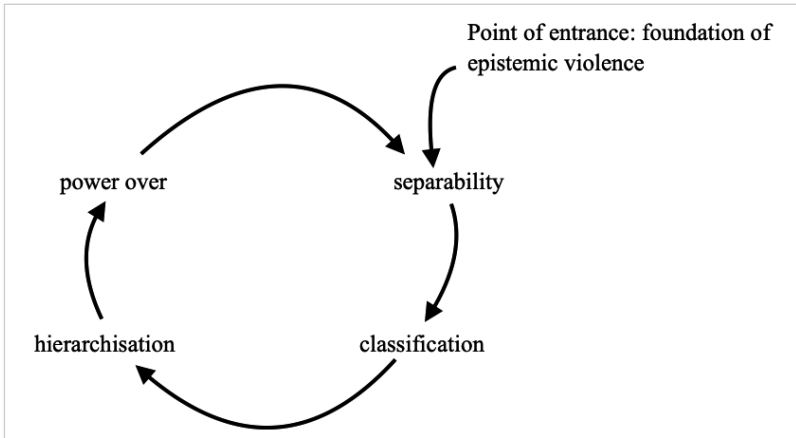


Figure 1: Mechanisms of epistemic violence

Source: Illustrated by the author

Epistemic violence is rooted in separability (Stein et al. 2020: 58) and encompasses intertwined and mutually reinforcing processes of classification, hierarchisation, and ‘power over’ – the power to naturalise such differences and turn them into social categories. A simplified illustration of this circular mechanism is depicted in image 1. As such, the epistemic territory of modernity thrives on the suppression of other forms of knowledge that are considered ‘non-modern’ and ‘non-scientific’. The violent nature of knowledge can therefore be identified as both a condition of the possibility of European colonial expansion, and its result, in the form of the accompanying universalisation of Eurocentric forms of knowledge. Exploring the epistemological concept of time and its relationship with memory is a necessary precursor to contextualising the monumentalisation of Bismarck as a central manifestation of epistemic violence.

With the global imposition of Western linear time – some authors refer to it as chrono-politics (Mills 2020) or Eurochronology (Cooppan 2019: 397) – the concept of time has become a vessel for epistemic violence. Eurochronology reproduces and legitimises global social inequalities through a threefold hegemony on a linear timeline: the “epistemic devaluation of

the past” (Hunfeld 2022: 106), the future-oriented mentality of progress (modernity) and the objectivity of the present, which “affirms the present as the only site of the real” (Vázquez 2009: 111). This temporal discrimination is central to the legitimation of colonial domination as it engenders the concept of the ‘Other’ as those existing in a different temporal space. Through the denial of the coevalness of existence (Fabian 1983: 25), Eurochronology constantly re-inscribes the global racial hierarchy of coloniality, “with the other feminized and racialized, positioned as outside/against the time of Reason and thus justifiably intervened upon to ‘develop’, ‘civilize’, and ‘educate’” (Motta/Bermudez 2019: 428). These processes not only exert temporal discrimination, but also continuously sever the ‘Others’ from their pasts, ancestral literacy, and cultural knowledge.

The epistemological framework of Eurochronology has a direct relationship with what is remembered collectively and the manner in which it is remembered. In the context of this article, memory is understood as “the past made present” (Rothberg 2009: 3), which renders memory an activity in the present in relation to the past. The politics of collective memory in urban spaces entangle representations of the past with their presence in urban space. In the logics of Eurochronology, the past is being reified, objectified, and discursively closed in order “to guarantee the relative stability of the past in its pastness” (Huyssen 2003: 1). The past is degraded to a mere object of knowledge and used as a resource for legitimising the present and shaping the future according to the status quo. Collective memory locks this very past into its pastness and exacerbates the modern/colonial logic of temporality in which “[m]emory is historicized, the age of museums is the age of institutions that have reduced the past into a proper place” (Vázquez 2009: 112). From this theoretical framework, I now explore monumentalisation as a concrete strategy for enshrining epistemic violence.

3. Denial carved in stone: Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg

Between November 1884 and March 1885, Otto von Bismarck hosted European leaders in Berlin to partition the African continent amongst themselves. This marked a turning point from the informal, free-trade

expansionism, which had been the prevailing concept underlying international relations on the global scale since the 16th century, to a formalised construct of colonial ‘ownership’. In what is now known as the West Africa Conference, Germany acquired a colonial empire consisting of ‘protectorates’ in what now makes up the territories of Togo, Cameroon, and Namibia (which constituted ‘German Southwest Africa’), as well as Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi (which made up ‘German East Africa’). This act laid the formal political foundation for the subsequent brutalisation of the local populations of these areas through German colonial and military delegates. The actual colonial wound of that event, as well as the repetition of its epistemic violence through formalised education, is depicted by Michel Kayoya:

“That ‘treaty’ which they call the Treaty of Berlin humiliated me for a long time. Every time I came across that date, I felt the same contempt. [...] But the worst thing was that I was taught this date. I had to learn it by heart. For one whole lesson, we were told the names of the participants in Berlin, their exceptional abilities, their diplomatic skill, the motives that each of them had. [...] But nobody absolutely nobody referred to the insult, the shame that accompanied us everywhere.”⁷¹ (Kayoya 1971: 89-90)

In collective memory, the instrumentality of oblivion (Vázquez 2009: 110) is essential to control the borders of the ‘epistemic territory of modernity’. The ‘relevant’ historical narratives about Bismarck are structured by whiteness and ignore perspectives and experiences such as Kayoya’s, thereby concealing Bismarck’s responsibility for German and European colonialism.

The hegemonic memory that is addressed in this article is materialised in a monument of Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the city of Hamburg. With a height of thirty four metres, it is the world’s largest statue of Bismarck, and metaphorically charged through its materiality of granite. The monument has been intentionally placed in strategic relation to the harbour of Hamburg, implying pride and achievement over the harbour as a symbol of access to the world. In the aftermath of his death in 1898, a group of bourgeois individuals initiated the construction of his monument, in part to honour his contribution to the establishment

of Hamburg's free port in 1888, which rendered Hamburg a nodal point of commercial and cultural movements in global colonial extraction. Kaitlin Murphy understands monuments as "speech acts: they are public proclamations of certain narratives that are intended to simultaneously reify that narrative and lay claim to the space" to "secure narratives of nation-building and White, male power" (Murphy 2021: 1147). The monumentalisation of Bismarck, dating back to the phase of heightened European imperial nationalism in the early 20th century, stands for an intentionally fixed narrative about the past that follows a clear politico-affective goal, namely to "govern, control and encourage collective affects" (Kølvraa/Knudsen 2020: 3) towards the nation-state. Hence, it is not just a permanent singular narrative about the past that is commemorated through Bismarck, but also its underlying ideological structures, which render the monument functional for the permanence of the status quo and the imagination of the future. In that reading, the national imaginary that Bismarck represents is detached from its imperial dimensions along an eclectic temporal horizon "that only makes visible those abstract or mythical pasts that are deemed useful for the construction of a community's political imaginary" (Hunfeld 2022: 107).

Otto von Bismarck, having been attributed with symbolic power as the founding father of the German nation-state in 1871, has remained a controversial political figure to this day. Historically, the working class has been opposed to erecting this cost-intensive monument (Todzi/Zimmerer 2021: 450), which later became a pilgrimage site for nationalists and national conservatives. Bismarck continues to represent not only colonial amnesia, but also nationalism and anti-democratism, and is a resource for right-wing terrorism, as the local activist group, Bismarck's Critical Neighbours, has underlined in a Press Statement (BCN 2022).

The monument of Bismarck limits and excludes different perceptions and experiences of that same past, thereby exemplifying "interrelated processes of epistemic invisibility: (1) making invisible what certain bodies say, think, feel, wish, and how they classify the world and themselves, etc.; (2) making invisible these bodies themselves; and finally (3) making invisible the very processes of epistemic invisibility" (Pinto 2017: 182). Hence, it embodies a foundational double mechanism of epistemic violence in modernity/coloniality (Vázquez 2012: 241) by epistemically devaluing the

past, carving into stone both the denial of Black subjectivity (having been assigned to the past) and of coloniality itself.

4. What's in a crack? Undoing epistemic violence through fissure

The politics of memory, including its curriculum of affective attunement, has constantly been contested, and the epistemic hegemony of national narratives increasingly scrutinised. More and more civil society actors, be they artists, activists, or advocacy groups for minorities, create their own memory cultures to reclaim their past as an indispensable part of the present. In that sense, the current atmosphere of contesting colonial narratives signifies a 'crack' within the 'epistemic territory of modernity'. Catherine Walsh (2018) outlines the importance of focusing on decolonial 'cracks' and on the practice of 'fissure' as concrete locations of possibilities where decolonisation can occur. While cracks can be the result of both intentional resistance and structural dysfunction built into the system, the practice of fissure denotes "a responsibility to open, widen, intercede in, and act from the decolonial fissures and cracks, and to make cracks within the spaces, places, institutions, and structures of the inside" (Walsh 2018: 84). Practices of fissure can be identified in concrete interventions aiming to destabilise modernity/coloniality. Decolonial interventions visibilise and re-politicise subjugated knowledges, including the modalities of their expression:

"[...] 'decolonial interventions' point towards a surfacing, baring, and bringing to bear modes of being and politics that are less visible, invisible, or seemingly unintelligible. This includes the works, acts and bodies that exist and resist with, through and in spite of colonial extraction, appropriation, and erasure." (Khoo/Vered 2020: 227)

Agencies of decolonial interventions lie with those who have become the main targets of epistemic violence, who have been rendered invisible and unintelligible, or in other words, have become "epistemic outcast[s]" (Pinto 2017: 181). These interventions cannot solely be reduced to their divergent interpretations or in distinction to existing relations of domi-

nance. Rather, they have an inherent creative potential of power for enunciating and making visible alternative knowledge systems (Icaza/Vázquez 2013: 684). Undoing epistemic violence requires questioning colonial binaries and breaking with the colonial grammar of modernity, which is based on Cartesian dualisms of mind/body, solipsist knowledge production, linearity and logocentrism, among others. Artistic decolonial interventions then appear as potential forms of epistemic fissure, since they “make use of modes of signification, forms of performance, ways of seeing and strategies for affectively ‘touching’ an audience” (Kølvraa/Knudsen 2020: 4). They entangle art with protest without necessarily reproducing the grammar of modernity that underlies such monuments. The immediate visibility of art in public space has the potential to directly influence public opinion and foster affective, social, and political change. Especially when speaking or performing from an embodied position of subalternity, artists and their interventions blur the lines between art and activism: the coming to visibility, in that case, is a political event and “appears as an ongoing struggle against the silencing, against the oblivion of suffering that is imposed by power” (Chavez/Vázquez 2017: 42). Against this analytical backdrop of epistemic fissure, I turn towards the above-mentioned intervention in order to explore its potentials and challenges. What can reading Bismarck-Dekolonial as epistemic fissure contribute to undoing epistemic violence?

5. Reading Bismarck-Dekolonial as a practice of fissure

The monument of Otto von Bismarck is currently being restored at the cost of nine million euros. This has incited much debate about what signal is being given, particularly in the larger context of dealing with Germany’s colonial past. Many local groups have been contesting both the restoration and the opaque process of decision-making regarding the restoration of Bismarck (BCN 2022; Gutiérrez 2021a). In response to this growing socio-political pressure, municipal authorities have now, after the intervention of Bismarck-Dekolonial, embarked on “a participation process in which a new contextualisation of the monument is to be implemented on the basis of an artistic-didactic competition” (Hamburg 2021a).

But to Yolanda Gutiérrez, Mexico-born dancer, choreographer, and curator from Hamburg, “it seemed wrong to wait until the renovations [were] finished. It seemed like a strange idea to stage an intervention once Bismarck’s [was] shining in all his glory” (Katzenstein 2023). She therefore initiated the project Bismarck-Dekolonial, which aims to incite a change of perspectives and highlight perspectives of those who were formerly colonised in the debate surrounding Bismarck and the restoration of his statue (Gutiérrez 2021a). The project received funds from the federal government through the performing arts fund (Fonds Darstellende Künste) and the Ministry of Culture and Media of the city of Hamburg (Behörde für Kultur und Medien). The peculiarity in the funding structure is that it is the same agencies responsible for Bismarck’s restoration who are funding artistic interventions, and have even initiated an artistic competition for recontextualising Bismarck. Bismarck-Dekolonial took place between April and August 2021 in the context of the International Summer Festival (Kampnagel). To address the wider absence of perspectives of people from formerly colonised countries, Gutiérrez created an audiowalk framework around the monument. Within that framework, she followed a ‘carte blanche approach’, in which she centred the artistic embodied narratives of individuals from former German colonies (Tanzania, Namibia, Cameroon, Togo and Rwanda) and a collaboration with the Mexican multimedia artist, Calavera. In a so-called virtual ‘Lab=forum’ in early 2021, the artists developed and discussed their contributions to decolonising the Bismarck monument in Hamburg. This resulted in an assemblage of six individual-collective interventions that together formed an audio walk journey around the monument of Bismarck (Table 1; Gutiérrez 2021b). In addition to the artists listed in the table below, the dancers Sarah Lasaki and Samwel Japhet also actively contributed to the performances.

This curational setting has strategic considerations: the monument of Bismarck itself is not clearly visible from under the trees of the park, but rather from a strategic viewing point on a nearby bridge (Image 2). In a performative walk, the audience is made to see the monument from a variety of perspectives, embodying the concepts of a change of perspective and circularity. The performances also address a variety of senses: through headphones, the audience hears music as well as spoken and recorded texts that accompany the dance performances.

Seq.	Name of station	Artists	Content summary
1	The Bismarck Consequences Pt.1	Isack Peter Abeneko and Shabani Muga-do (Tanzania)	Dance performance with address to the audience whether and why they accept the restoration of the monument
2	Moro Mehi Retu Pt.1	Vitjitua Ndjiharine and Faizel Brownny (Namibia)	Solo dance performance by Faizel Brownny
3	Midoto	Moussa Issiaka (Togo)	Dance performance addressing the topics of silence and voice and the imagery of measurement
4	The Bismarck Consequences Pt.2	Isack Peter Abeneko and Shabani Muga-do (Tanzania)	Dance/theatrical performance that engages with the spatial arrangement of the hill (on which the monument stands) and the topic of superiority
5	Kalangou	Stone (Cameroon)	Spoken word performance, enhanced by dance performance, thematising temporality and colonial relationships
6	Moro Mehi Retu Pt.2	Vitjitua Ndjiharine and Faizel Brownny (Namibia)	Art installation of putting on a traditional Herero dress
7	Videomapping	Fabian Villasana aka. Dr. Calavera (Mexico) and Dolph Banza (Rwanda)	Projection of critical light illustrations onto the Bismarck monument, telling visual stories about Bismarck from perspectives of the formerly colonised

Table 1: Overview of the stations of the audio-walk ‘Bismarck-Dekolonial’

Source: Own illustration



Figure 2: Looking back at Bismarck

Source: Igor Sherba, *Munimum Photography*

In the following, I apply the analytical lens of fissure to selected stations of the intervention and explore some of its implications for challenging the epistemic violence inscribed into the monument.

As a multivocal intervention, Bismarck-Dekolonial creates a context for touching the audience on an affective level, “wherein seeing leads not only to knowledge but also, importantly, to feeling— and [...] this, in some direct or indirect capacity, will then result in sociopolitical impact” (Murphy 2018: 6). While such a notion of affective transformation can be associated with the problematic reproduction of colonial binaries such as reason-affect, or mind-body, among others, it addresses the deeply affective, yet often neglected dimensions of epistemic violence. Contrary to the underlying implications of rational calculation, epistemic violence relies on processes of fear and denial – the appeasing and upholding of which stabilises the epistemic territory of modernity (Stein et al. 2020: 57).

It should not be underestimated, however, that the intervention relies on BIPoC² “to do the intellectual and affective work in decolonization processes by explaining and emotionally enduring their perspectives, experiences, and stories to white people” (Stein et al. 2021: 53). While this

allows for processes of their visibilisation and repoliticisation, on the other hand, it burdens the artists, not only with a heavy emotional task, but also with being subjected to reproductions of epistemic violence. The audience, however, also bears the demanding task of decolonial listening:

“To listen means to bridge the colonial difference, the rift that separates the visible and the invisible, ‘the real’ and ‘the absent’. [...] The act of remembrance, of relating to the past in the manner of listening, escapes the reduction of reality to presence; it escapes the modern colonial rule of representation and appropriation. It contains the possibility of breaking open the linear continuity of history, the chronology of domination.” (Vázquez 2012: 7f.)

Nevertheless, the relation between artists and audience is unequal, since the audience has the option of deciding whether they are receptive to decolonial listening. Their responsibility to do so is called upon with the first station of the audiowalk, “The Bismarck Consequences” by Isack Peter Abeneko and Shabani Mugado, a sequence of theatrical movements reminiscent of military marches. Through headphones, the audience is confronted with a series of questions posed by the artists:

“Do you really celebrate Bismarck as German legend? Yes or No? Why your government puts so much money, so many euros into Bismarck’s monument? What does this tell today in this multicultural Hamburg city? What are we learning from this? What does this mean to the countries who were colonised by Germany? What does it mean?” (Abeneko/Mugado 2021)

Through these insistent questionings, the audience can begin to see themselves as ‘implicated subjects’ who “contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes” (Rothberg 2019: 1). This raises important questions about implication, complicity and responsibility in the context of German colonialism, thereby rendering the intervention a pedagogical tool for the re-examination of one’s identity.

5.1 Rescuing the Past I: re-enacting and re-existing

With the intervention, a group of artists of African descent are re-storying history, which is – in and of itself – a central tool of decolonial resistance, because “the avowal of those who have been denied existence in the present, leads to an understanding of the past as a force of liberation” (Vázquez 2012: 247). The performances are “rescuing the past” (Vázquez 2009: 110), unlocking it from its pastness and bringing it into the present through reenactments, which are “a tool through which to evoke past events and bodies” (Murphy 2018: 155). In some instances, the performances also ‘re-exist’ through dignifying their ancestral knowledges and literacies. Adolfo Albán has coined the term ‘re-existence’ to epitomise practices of “redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity” (Albán Achinte 2008: 85)³ for communities targeted by colonial violence:

“Re-existence as the mechanisms that communities create and develop to invent daily life and power, in this way confronting the hegemonic project that, since colonization until our present day, has inferiorized, silenced, and negatively made visible existence.” (Albán Achinte 2013: 455)⁴



Figure 3: Moro Mehi Retu

Source: Igor Sherba, *Munimum Photography*

Re-existence becomes most visible in the piece “Moro Mehi Retu” (“Greetings from our land”) by Vitjitua Ndjiharine (Image 3). It is a two-part performance. In the first part, the audience moves to a sandy soccer pitch where Faizel Brownly performs a sophisticated individual dance with expressive motions that suggest an attitude of dignity and physical liberation. In the second part, after walking around the graffiti-covered walls that protect the Bismarck monument, the audience witnesses an art installation where Vitjitua Ndjiharine puts on the traditional Herero dress while dancer Faizel Brownly is standing next to her. She explains, in a recording heard through headphones:

“This installation work is inspired by my people, really, their resilience, their brilliance, their creativity, and their survival under extreme oppressive conditions. And to be able to take something like the Herero dress, which was imposed under these colonial conditions, and to turn that around as a symbol of the culture, as a symbol of beauty, but also as a symbol of one’s own individualism – I think that is brilliant.” (Ndjiharine 2021)

In referring to “their survival under extreme oppressive conditions”, the performance of Ndjiharine celebrates both survival and resistance and symbolises:

“[...] projects of society and life despite adverse conditions (of enslavement, dehumanization, racialization, and discrimination), and [being able] to surpass and overcome these conditions in order to occupy a social and cultural place of dignity: a re-existence as subjects and with others in radically distinct terms.” (Walsh 2018: 95)

Recovering ancestral knowledge also relates to upholding oral traditions, in contrast to modernity’s textuality. Orality is fluid, metaphorical, unfixable, and finds expression through the performances. It is a communal praxis which transgresses the hyper-individualism of modernity. Countering textuality with orality appears as a reproduction, rather than a questioning, of colonial binaries – but, in the messy process of undoing epistemic violence, reclaiming ancestral literacies is a crucial step towards interrupting and reversing processes of devaluation (see Image

1). At some point, this needs to be accompanied or followed by analyses and the acknowledgement of the inter-relationalities that have been so neatly separated through the modern/colonial fantasy of separability. In the interventions, ancestral knowledge is embodied in symbolic, metaphorical work, such as dance performances, but also in re-enacting ancestral practices, such as the *Kalangou*, the putting on of a Herero dress, or the use of indigenous languages (*Midoto*).

While walking towards the bridge, the audience hears Moussa Issiaka explaining the meaning of his piece “Midoto” (“to listen carefully”), saying that “as a choreographer, my work is based on language, because in the colonial time, they use modern language as a barrier to separate us or to control us. Nowadays they cannot control it – we are speaking English, a European language, but we are still having our own dialect” (Issiaka 2021). The subsequent performance combines theatrical, symbolic movements of measuring the Bismarck statue through voice, sound, and movement. It applies epistemic practices of measurement and classification – practices which have been used for colonial appropriation and submission (power over) – back to Bismarck, reclaiming agency and power over epistemic processes.

As the dancers walk back and forth between the railing of the bridge towards the audience, they imitate speaking in their mother tongues, but do so without sound. This image materialises the epistemic strategy of silencing. The performance culminates in a scream that signifies how the silencing is broken through, followed by a different kind of silence and a collective hopeful gaze towards the horizon.

5.2 Rescuing the past II: relational temporalities

In “Kalangou”, the artist Stone offers the spoken word performance, accompanied by his talking drum (Image 4). The talking drum is an hourglass-shaped drum that can be regulated in pitch to mimic the sound of human speech. It was used to communicate across villages, since the sounds of the drum would travel faster than those of a human being. Alternating between his mother tongue, English, and German, Stone critiques modernity’s temporal discrimination while irritating Eurochronic notions of linear time: “‘We have to turn the page’ – you say. But how can I turn the page when your past is my future?” (Stone 2021). This resonates with

Homi Bhabha's reading of Frantz Fanon, in which he problematises the modern/colonial "time-lag" that enshrines temporal discrimination. Resistance can encompass rejecting the notion of "the 'belatedness' of the Black man because it is only the opposite of the framing of the White man as universal, normative" and refusing "to occupy the past of which the White man is the future" (Bhabha 1991: 195).



Figure 4: Kalangou

Source: Igor Sherba, Munimum Photography

Relational temporalities, instead, underlie the move of rescuing the past; they break with linear chronology and the materiality of its presence enshrined in public space. They represent the possibility of engaging with time 'otherwise', in evoking an understanding of a past that lies before us, which is "a temporality in which what has been is ahead of the formation of presence, of consistency and embodiment" (Chavez/Vázquez 2017: 43). Indeed, such understandings of time are common across African philosophies, which are interwoven with the intervention, because the artists are People of African Descent. In East African ontologies, as John Mbiti lays out, time moves backwards, not forwards towards a future climax. To explain this, he introduces the Swahili concepts of *Sasa* (Micro-Time)

and Zamani (Macro-Time): “Sasa is really an experiential extension of the Now-moment [...] stretched into the short future and into the unlimited past (or Zamani)” (Mbiti 1969: 22). Zamani, in representing the unlimited and experienced past, “the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before” (Mbiti 1969: 23), overlaps with Sasa: “before events become incorporated into the Zamani, they have to become realised or actualised within the Sasa dimension. When this has taken place, then the events ‘move’ backwards from the Sasa into the Zamani” (Mbiti 1969: 23).

The notion of such a past lying before – or in front of – us is related to the orientation of the observer. While Eurochronology is based on a linear teleology, rejecting and objectifying the past in favour of an orientation towards the future, these relational ontologies turn towards the past not as something fixable and carvable in stone. Rather, they nurture and tend to a relationship with the ancestors in order to gain orientation and knowledge in the present. When memory is performed through a relational temporal framework, it entails “the possibility of going back to the source of alternatives [...] hosted in the past” (Vázquez 2012: 8). The interventions perform a relational, embodied way of remembering that radically differs from Bismarck’s monumentalisation. Being part of the repertoire, which Diana Taylor differentiates from the archive, their embodied knowledge cannot be separated from the artists as the knowers (Taylor 2003: 20). While their power seems to lie in the transitory, the ephemeral movements of dance and performance, it doesn’t mean that they disappear after the performance. The performed knowledges and memories – such as the silently spoken dialects, the Kalangou, and the putting on of a Herero dress – are cultural and ancestral. They have been enunciated before, by other people, and elsewhere, which implies the underlying relational temporality.

6. Conclusion: epistemic violence and colonial circularities

With monumentalisation, I have explored a concrete strategy of epistemic violence that emerges from Eurochronic time. Reading Bismarck-Dekolonial as an instance of epistemic fissure has allowed for tapping into relational temporalities, which unlock the past from its Eurochronic imprisonment and destabilise the epistemic territory of modernity.

The open questions are whether and how the analytics of epistemic fissure are sufficient for artistic interventions to contribute to ‘undoing’ epistemic violence. If we understand epistemic violence as an “amorphous substance of connective and disruptive lines between and among different, more visible and identifiable forms of violence” (Brunner 2020: 272)⁵, the materiality of political in/exclusion, oppression and structural discrimination needs to be addressed alongside epistemic dimensions.

In that regard, artistic interventions such as Bismarck-Dekolonial run the risk of being appropriated through municipal authorities, falling under the buzzword of ‘recontextualisation’ that currently is popular when dealing with colonial monuments. If they are not accompanied by pedagogical work that encourages decolonial listening, as well as political and structural transformation, including “a multilayered participatory process that includes different groups” (Katzenstein 2023), initiatives such as the ongoing competition for artistic interventions to recontextualise Bismarck (Hamburg 2021b) appear as a mere bandage. In that aspect, their main function is to calm civil society with regard to its limited political participation in the issue of whether to restore Bismarck. We need to bear in mind that BIPoC perspectives are not only amplified, in a positive sense, but also potentially altered, in a negative sense, when they are limited in how far they can go (BCN 2022). This raises the questions of whether and when artistic interventions such as Bismarck-Dekolonial can be practices of fissure, and of when they are incorporated into the epistemic territory of modernity and become part of its grammar.

The analytical framework of epistemic fissure in academia relies on questioning the codes, symbols, and grammars of modernity and making artistic interventions intelligible for modernity so as to enable them to intervene and thereby exert fissure. Thus, it potentially reproduces colonial binaries which themselves need to be questioned and transformed. As colonial binaries are a central and self-reinforcing mechanism of the cycle of epistemic violence (see Image 1), ‘undoing’ epistemic violence requires interrupting these binaries without glossing over them or dissolving them into insignificance. Rather, it calls for a ‘working through’ which involves both the deconstruction of superiority through decolonial listening, humility and affective transformation, and the re-dignification of knowledges and communities marked as ‘inferior’ through practices such as

‘re-existence’ and rescuing the past. Only then, can a genuine process towards tackling the foundational separability and moving towards inter-relationality succeed.

Visual artist Dior Thiam reflects on colonial binaries of time that are being reproduced when dealing with the monument of Bismarck:

“I think that the deconstruction of colonial power, especially visually is a very slow process [...] [slowness] can counteract the idea of progress in the modern sense of the word, of acceleration as something generally good. [It] can also point to modes of healing and of reconciliation that are not things that can just happen quickly, or that can be imposed, I think instead, it could give the necessary time to sort of learn to live *with* the painful histories that we all carry, as – I guess – formerly colonized and marginalized people have had to do for a long time, instead to rush to sort of get over that history or to get to the end of that process as quickly as possible.” (Thiam 2021)

Thiam not only problematises the speed of Eurochronology, including desires to deal with the past in order ‘to get over it’, but also underlines the endurance of BIPoC, who have had to live with painful histories for a long time. The awareness of the unequal resources and workload being distributed to the formerly colonised instead of to descendants of former colonisers and implicated subjects, must lead to taking responsibility and practically redistributing the intellectual and emotional work.

Yet also, the affective and relational dimensions of epistemic violence provide many opportunities to reproduce violence in the process of trying to ‘undo’ it. The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective identifies affective investments (colonial CIRCULAR-ities, an acronym for continuity, innocence, recentring, certainty, unrestricted autonomy, leadership, authority, and recognition) which “emerge in efforts to make changes that nonetheless seek to retain or restore [...] colonial entitlements and desires” (Stein et al. 2020: 54). In the discussed case, such circularities include, among others, the desire for ‘continuity’ of the monument and its restoration, the desire for ‘innocence’ through national or municipal rehabilitation of colonial history, ‘recentring’ the self through the desire for redemption, ‘certainty’ of fixed knowledge through holding on to Eurochronic notions of time, and ‘unrestricted autonomy’, for example through munic-

ipal strategies of dealing with the past in contrast to national or European collective efforts. Such colonial circularities enable the continuity of epistemic violence and therefore need to be addressed and transformed as part of ‘undoing’ epistemic violence. These concluding reflections show some of the limitations of artistic interventions. While they may point towards a decolonial imaginary of thinking about time differently through relational temporalities, they require additional efforts in other areas, such as politics, education, and science, for a more holistic approach to decolonisation.

Acknowledgments

This article was written as part of the project “Struggles of Interpretation in the Coloniality of Peace” in the context of the “Joint Project: Interdisciplinary Center for Peace and Conflict Research in Bavaria” [grant number 01UG2204B], funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

- 1 The quote has been translated from French to English.
- 2 BIPoC is an abbreviation commonly used to refer to *Black, Indigenous and People of Color* and refers to political categories that emerge from the experience of being colonised and structurally oppressed.
- 3 The quote has been translated from Spanish to English.
- 4 The quote has been translated from Spanish to English.
- 5 The quote has been translated from German to English.

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ABSTRACT Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Möglichkeiten und Herausforderungen künstlerischer Interventionen für das Undoing von epistemischer Gewalt in der öffentlichen urbanen Erinnerung. Er untersucht sich auf zeitliche Imaginarien, die der Erinnerungspolitik und ihren Anfechtungen zugrunde liegen, und problematisiert die Kolonialität der Zeit, die sich in Praktiken der Monumentalisierung materialisiert, die dem öffentlichen urbanen Raum epistemische Gewalt einschreiben. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf die Intervention ‚Bismarck-Dekolonial‘, die sich mit dem höchsten Denkmal der Welt für Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg befasst. Er wendet einen analytischen Rahmen epistemischer Rissbildung an, der die Risse in westlichen Zeitimaginarien offenlegt und die Komplexität des Doings und des Undoings epistemischer Gewalt nachzeichnet.

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