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# HOW AND WHY? THE POST/ DECOLONIAL AS METHOD IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN THEATRE

*meLê yamomo*

In October 2019, during my expedition to the Centre for Research in Ethnomusicology in Paris in search of the wax cylinder recordings of the visiting Pinpeat orchestra from Cambodia during the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, I managed to catch the much celebrated *Les Indes Galantes* at Opera Bastille. This baroque opera, which premiered in 1735, presents the French imagination of three different Indies: Turkey, the Americas, and Persia, set to Jean-Philippe Rameau's Baroque music. In his staging, the director Clement Cogitore pushes us to confront the opera's exoticization of the imaginary Indies with contemporary Paris's multiculturalism. In today's postmigrant Paris, the exotic Other is not in a faraway land. The Other is at the heart of the Self. Choreographer Bintou Dembélé transformed the ballet of the 'savages' into an electrifying street dance battle by the Krump, vogue, and hip-hop community—entangling the Black community's use of contemporary dance within their daily struggles in their home city. In postcolonial Paris, the Self and the Other are the two faces of the same coin confronting one another in defining the same Self (I introduced these ideas in a keynote lecture at the Mannheimer Sommer 2020, see yamomo 2020). The cast received a resounding twenty-minute standing ovation and the impact of the piece was palpable. In my head, I was asking: is this postcolonial? This inquiry is rooted in the question: for what and for whom is the performance intended? Is it intended for prestigious institutions to perform their inclusivity in a self-congratulatory manner? Is it a public proclamation of how the bourgeois society is finally allowing Black culture on the hallowed stages of one of Europe's old imperial opera houses? Is postcolonialism about the legitimization of non-White theatre within the European canons and institutions?

## **When and where is postcolonial?**

At the onset, we are confronted with the questions of *when* with the prefix 'post' in postcolonialism. Sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996) problematizes the epochal thinking between the binary of colonialism as the period of occupation and the distinctive moment of independence and formation of new nation states as the postcolonial. Going beyond the historicization of formal political occupation, literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha reconsiders the merging of postmodernity and postcoloniality in a single cultural historical

framework. He proposes the corrective of postmodernity's hubristic stance towards the demise of metanarratives through postcoloniality's 'awareness that the epistemological "limits" of those ethnocratic ideas are the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities' (Bhabha 1994, 5). In a critical re-evaluation of colonial historiography, Walter D. Mignolo considers colonialism as the underside of Europe's history of modernity. He argues that modernity and coloniality 'go hand in hand, and you cannot have modernity without coloniality; the unfinished project of modernity carries over its shoulders the unfinished project of coloniality' (Mignolo 2006, 312). Thus, it is in the recognition and systemic restructuring of Eurocentric modernity's project away from its racist epistemologies and extractive economic system that a potentiality for a shift towards the postcolonial could be imagined.

The question of *where* also arises when considering the root word of colonialism, as it refers to the appropriation or occupation of geo-political spaces. And while early discourses of postcolonialism emerged from the position of the colonized and from the context of formerly occupied regions, how do we now reconsider its theory and politics from within the perspective of the former colonial metropolises in Europe? The paradox in the geography of postcolonial Europe manifests itself in the juxtaposition of Europe's continued preoccupation with the mapping and controlling of its territorial borders today and its long history of imperial quest for geographic colonial expansion. In today's Europe, this epistemological disconnect is rooted in an ostensible understanding of 'postcoloniality' relegated as the business of former colonies effectively segregating it from the domain of European polity. Thus, Mignolo's formulation of consolidating the duality of historicizing modernity/colonialism

shifts the geography of reason and illuminates the fact that the colonies were not a secondary and marginal event in the history of Europe but, on the contrary, colonial history is the non-acknowledged center in the making of modern Europe

*(Mignolo 2009, 16)*

### **Who is postcolonial?**

The question therefore of postcoloniality within the context of Europe is less a question of where and when, but of *who*. Anthropologist Partha Chatterjee elaborating on the epistemic divide between modernity and colonialism also discloses the agencies and flows of power within the matrix of a Eurocentrically imagined universal modernity:

Somehow, from the very beginning, we had made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken as serious producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity.

*(Chatterjee 1998, 275)*

In particularizing this critique within the European internal geopolitics, we understand that the inequality in the social identities and political agencies of today's legal, social, and cultural conception of European identity/ies are hidden behind the double-edged sword

of cosmopolitanism, contrasted with the thorny politics of multiculturalism. Expanding on German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's reframing of European multiculturalism as 'postcolonial immigrant societies' (2009, 65), Gurminder K. Bhambra points out how this 'parochial understanding ... limits the "postcolonial" to those "others" who migrate to Europe, and renders invisible the long-standing histories that connect those migrants with Europe' (Bhambra 2016, 188). Ultimately, neo-colonialism in Europe persists in today's neo-liberal capitalism and in systemic racism justified as 'immigration crisis'—which needs to be redressed less as an immigration crisis but of a crisis of Europe confronting its colonial history.

The question, therefore, is how can the theatre and, in extension, the social dramaturgy of the European society at large move beyond what Homi K. Bhabha criticized as colonial mimicry? The transformation that we need should go beyond the feigned democracy behind the mask of what Bhabha calls the 'metonymy of presence' (1984, 130–131). This refers to the racial and political hierarchies reiterated in the symbolic powers of performativity of the Anglicized (or Germanized or Frenchified or Dutchified) as only a metonymy of the desired and mimicked English (German, French, or Dutch). How can we then recalibrate current artistic and cultural practices into Europe's postcolonial reality? How can we decolonize European aesthetics and aistheses? If we are to take the decolonial framework, where, with whom, and how can we locate the theatrical articulations of postcolonial transformations in contemporary theatre in Europe today?

In the last two decades, there have been institutional steps taken by European cultural institutions and state funding agencies for the performing arts to address issues of diversity. Diversity as a framework, however, often reiterates the 'tolerant' multicultural perspective that often only encourages token representations of artists of colour within a still primarily conservative and ethnocentric system. A handful of bodies of colour may be included in the company, but the canons, the repertoire, and the *modus operandi* remain the same. And as theatre scholar Azadeh Sharifi points out, 'the emphasis is placed on the side of the audience and not on the artists in the institutions'. This means that the 'state theatres want to create diversity within their audiences – a diversity which does not exist in their own structures' (Sharifi 2017, 324).

In circling back to Chaterjee's earlier question and connecting this to the question of *who*, we now ask how can we decolonize European theatre by expanding the dramatic personae of who gets to produce new enunciations and performativities of today's postcolonial Europe?

### Post/decolonial as performance

Many scholarly reflections on postcoloniality and decoloniality—this chapter included—begin as a polemic to the recognition of Europe's unaddressed colonial history. The formulation of the term in itself reinforces that. 'Colonialism' takes prominence as the root word to which the prefixes 'post' and 'de' are logocentrically attached and which they denotatively negate. Having thought through the array of discourses on postcolonialism above, we are still confronted with the theoretical conundrum of whether 'post' here signifies a historical end or an epistemological beginning? Having asked *when*, *where*, and *who* is postcolonial, I invite us to consider its *how* (method) and *why* (epistemology) through performativity.

This volume focuses on contemporary practices of theatre circumscribed within the geo-political imagining of the European continent. Therefore, within such a demarcation of territorial boundary, the discourse on colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism

in the theatre practices manifests itself with the (post)migrant theatre discourse (⇒ Chapter 62). As Lizzie Stewart points out, ‘postmigrant’ in its very construction has clear ‘associations with the postcolonial or even postracial’ (Stewart 2017, 56). In reconciling contemporary Europe with its long history of colonialism, we take into account its postmigrant condition—a society long transformed by its centuries-long relationship with mobilities of human labour, cultural technologies, and aesthetics. Rather than just imagining how Europe’s universalized history of modernity transforms the world and its citizens within its constructed borders, we reframe the global as postcolonial. In doing so, the linear narrative circles back to recalibrate the singularity and superiority of European canons and repertoires into how ultimately Europe is where it is now because of the artistic and cultural labour brought in by its relationship with its ‘postcolonial’ citizens. To recognize colonialism as the *raison d’être* of today’s Eurocentric global order would allow us to move beyond an ethnically White imagination of Europe. And within this framework, we could examine the aesthetic methods and artistic strategies of postmigrant theatre as a crucial source of the *how* in the postcolonial practice of theatre in contemporary Europe.

At the epicenter of the postmigrant theatre movement, are the Berlin theatres Ballhaus Naunynstraße and Maxim Gorki under the direction of Shermin Langhoff. Deniz Utlu, a playwright and author who has collaborated with Theater Ballhaus Naunynstraße, sees postmigrant theatre as ‘political theatre ... made by theatre practitioners “of colour”’ (quoted in Sharifi 2013, 104). Emerging from theatre practice in the 1990s Germany, the term ‘postmigrant’ entered cultural studies and the social sciences only quite recently (Stewart 2017, 57). Postmigrant theatre is an intervention into the history of exclusion in aesthetics given that artists of immigrant backgrounds were excluded from theatre institutions for ‘not being “German enough” to participate in “national” high culture’ (Landry 2020, 443 quoted in Schaper 2012). There has been also exclusion in recognition and funding in how the works of artists of colour are categorized as ethnic art, precluded from professional recognition, and reduced to ‘socially engaged’ or ‘community’ art. Theatre scholar Azadeh Sharifi further argues that ‘[t]his downgrading of the artistic quality also takes place on a state level with respect to funding’. She elaborates that ‘[t]here is an institutional separation of funding for White artists and artists of colour. The study indicates that this classification – at least in Germany, Austria, and France – is used to justify access to and denial of funds’ (Sharifi 2017, 332).

In entangling the postcolonial with the postmigrant discourse, I underscore the *how* of the postcolonial—as a method and a performative act. As Sharifi explains, postmigrant theatre, framed within the bigger discourse of postcolonial, tells ‘stories from the margins and still [knows] the centre’ (Sharifi 2013, 104).

In this chapter, rather than proposing canons, I draw from specific experiences, moments of performative, and theatrical interventions by artists, organizations, and from specific theatrical events. I present them both for their aesthetics contribution, but more importantly for the performative/theatrical methodologies that they employ that disentangle new post- and decolonial performative, dramaturgical, and artistic enunciations beyond the institutional frameworks of theatre production. I interweave the different case studies as different threads of my archival research, performance analysis, and the auto-ethnography of my own artistic process. Therefore, rather than presenting *what* and *who* as an exercise of theatre canon-making, I would like to underscore the *how* and the *why* in the postcolonial and decolonial praxis. I present here three decolonial practices from the postmigrant practices. Operating in the independent theatre scene, the work of Asli Kışlal with *daskunst*, as well

as the appointment of Langhoff as curator of the 2011 Wiener Festwochen can be seen as a crucial paradigmatic shift in the postmigrant and postcolonial theatre in Austria. In the Netherlands, the organization The Need for Legacy (NFL) works towards greater visibility of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) Dutch theatre artists and towards developing postcolonial and postmigrant strategies and methods to decolonize the Dutch theatre scene. As a third case study, I provide an overview of the recent festival ‘Postcolonial Poly Perspective’ by Theater Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, looking at the curatorial strategy to engage the topic of post- and decoloniality from the perspective of the everyday acts (⇒ Chapter 69).

### **daskunst and the postmigrant theatre scene in Vienna**

The Austrian theatre scene distinguishes between the state theatres and the independent venues; groups and artists of colour and with postmigrant backgrounds operate only in the independent scene. Venues such as the Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus (WUK) provided the spaces for creation and production, allowing the development of postmigrant theatre scene in Vienna. In 2004, the art and cultural organization daskunst was founded under the direction of Kişlal. Comprised of a thirty-person ensemble, the group was connected to the Theaterhaus GarageX. Aiming to represent the diversity of Austrian artists and to introduce contemporary issues to an equally heterogeneous audience, daskunst dubbed itself as a “neo-original Viennese, multi-citizen theatre ensemble” (Sharifi 2017, 342).

In the 2010/2011 season, Kişlal together with daskunst worked as artist in residence at GarageX. During this theatre season, daskunst received significant attention from the media and public. Through the festival series *Pimp My Integration* which run between 2011 and 2012, daskunst established for itself an important place in contemporary Austrian theatre. Co-curated by Kişlal and Carolin Vikoler from daskunst and Ali M. Abdullah and Harold Posch from Garage, *Pimp My Integration* featured postmigrant artistic perspectives, identities, and issues in the contemporary Austrian context (Sharifi 2017, 342).

Marking further developments in the postmigrant scene in Austria, Langhoff was appointed the deputy director and head curator of the Wiener Festwochen in 2011. Langhoff was also instrumental in the establishment of postmigrant theatre in Berlin through Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and Maxim Gorki Theater. The published call for the festival curation specifically requested ‘concepts to ensure gender mainstreaming, intercultural, and participation’. Further, the announcement indicates that ‘the intercultural structure of Vienna with its historical roots should be reflected in the programme planning for which an active involvement of the cultural scene in Vienna and diverse, “low-threshold” venues are desired’ (Austrian Press Agency 2011). Following these developments, Austria has had an emergent but prolific postmigrant theatre scene.

### **The Need for Legacy**

Not a performance or production company, but rather an organization formed and run by postmigrant Dutch theatre artists of colour since 2020, The NFL Foundation organizes meetings for BIPOC artists to have an unfiltered conversation in a safe space and works to raise awareness and to ensure the permanent visibility of theatre canons by artists of colour. One of its core projects is the critical examination of existing archives and an intervention in the assembly of a new Dutch performing arts archive as a corrective to knowledge

production and creation of Dutch theatre history. NFL is actively working with various festivals, production houses, and theatre schools in the entire country.

Since its very recent establishment, NFL has already done significant interventions into the national and established theatre institutions in the Netherlands. In 2021, it embarked on a five-year project to commission new portraits of important makers of colour in Dutch theatre history to be added to the permanent display of prominent Dutch theatre artists at the International Theatre Amsterdam. A portrait of Rufus Collins (New York, 1935 – Amsterdam, 1996) was unveiled in March 2021. Collins, an African American theatre-maker and teacher, came to the Netherlands in 1981 and directed various productions including the controversial opera *The Kingdom* about the Black independence movement in Haiti. In 1985, together with Surinamese playwright and theatre-maker Henk Tjon, he founded De Nieuw Amsterdam, a professional theatre company that pioneered the development of non-Western and culturally diverse theatre-making in the Netherlands.

The foundation's two board members, Naomi van der Linden and Gable Roelofsen, guest-edited the entire March 2021 issue of *Theaterkrant*—a magazine whose readership spans the entire theatre-making community and theatre-going population of the Netherlands. The special issue included various articles on the topics of company management, casting, and archiving, written by prominent Dutch theatre artists and scholars. Included in this issue is the keynote lecture by theatre scholar Sruti Bala, delivered at the inauguration of NFL at the Netherlands International Theatre Festival in 2019.

### **Postcolonial Poly Perspectives Festival**

Between April and December 2019, Theater Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin presented the Postcolonial Poly Perspectives, a festival that 'focuses on everyday life, on artistic, activist, and theoretical approaches to decolonize the present' (Theater Ballhaus Naunynstrasse 2019). With a line-up of different performances, dance pieces, video, and literature, the program problematizes the mono-perspective patterns of perception and interpretation of traditional and powerful White narratives. The performance makers, choreographers, artists, and writers zoomed in on small quotidian acts such as eating, listening, folding clothes, hair styling, or surfing, as sites of decolonization—exploding them into multiplicities of perspectives as an aesthetic strategy. Four productions featured in the festival disentangle the postcolonial issues and identities from the micro-perspective of the mundane.

In *An Object is an Object is What?*, three Black women choreographers and dancers unpacked three acts and objects as instances of investigation and redeeming of the self from the colonial and patriarchal system. In *Conversing with Oceans*, Duduzile Voigts took the ocean surf and the act of surfing to examine the balancing act required by the White and male-dominated competitive game to reclaim the ocean and the sport for the Black female body. In *The Highlight of the Shadow*, Sophia Ndaba reflected on the light and dark, the self and the shadow, the illuminated and the concealed, to map her body within an often predetermined social context. The performer and singer TRVANIA in *Inneres Wachstum* (Inner growth) examined the personal and social consequences of the medical evidence of an increased risk of cancerous tumours among African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-German, and African American women (nine-fold higher than in the case of White population).

Based on video interviews conducted with six Black women speaking about their White German grandmothers, Magda Korsinsky in her dance and video piece, *Stricken*



(Knitting), presented a contemporary panorama of Black German sociology. Onstage, Korsinsky showed a mixed race nine-year-old girl and her White grandmother performing in a dance the generational passing-on of gendered domestic acts of folding laundry, dressing up, and fixing the hair. In her choreography of repetitions—of copying and reiteration of quotidian actions—Korsinsky revealed the formation of socialized and gender role habits. And in concealing the Black daughter-in-law in the equation, the performance also revealed the invisible suppressions and denials in the racial dynamics within intercultural families.

Nasheeka Nedsreal's *New Growth* performed the gamut of cultural and political discourse entangled with Black women's hair. Through a montage of dance, video, and spoken word, Nedsreal unravelled the European racist perceptions, patriarchal fantasies and prejudices, and constructions of self-images from power matrices intertwined with the styling of her hair, its covering and uncovering, and the media renderings of this biological feature.

In *sonus – the sound within us*, I myself tuned in to the act of listening – to the sentimentality of the soundtrack of my childhood in my small hometown in the Philippines in resonance to the urban soundscape of Kreuzberg, Berlin. I drew from my theoretical reflections in my book *Sounding Modernities* to resound imperial histories and cultural memories as they are archived in the colonized bodies. I interspersed the lecture performance about my theory of the 'sonus' (yamomo 2018, 42) which is the sonic image that transpires between sound and the body, with video pieces and musical performances onstage with fellow postmigrant artists and academics. In placing the postmigrant voice centre stage, I amplified the struggles and resistances against inscribed European and colonial hearing and listening expectations towards the bodies and voices of colour.

## Coda

Reflecting on the work of *daskunst*, the NFL, and the artistic practices within Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, we observe that postcoloniality in contemporary European theatre is an epistemic transformation. The onus moves away from the semiotic game, or tokenistic casting, and diversification of characters from the perspective of Eurocentrically trained directors, playwrights, and festival programmers. It requires the methodological and epistemic shift towards a process that practices the postponement of aesthetic and artistic privileging and the transfer of agency and power to marginalized voices. It is therefore from this positionality that visions of a postcolonial Europe can emerge from the perspective of those that were and continue to be disenfranchised by histories and sociocultural power dynamics of colonialism.

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