Listening as critique

Towards a methodology of absent presences in research on coloniality

Marte Van Hassel

> The question of listening, a form of the question of relationality, poses a particular challenge to the epistemic enclosure of modernity. How to listen to conviviality? How to listen to the impoverished, to common people, to communities as sites of interpellation? How to listen to the voices, tradition, philosophies of the communities that present alternatives to modernity? (Rolando Vázquez, *Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity,* 6)

> When letter is combined with letter, that is game with game, the obscurity of the form reveals the clarity of a sound, and this slow clarity opens the way to a meaning which has a form. Three letters turn into a door or a dwelling. Thus obscure letters, which have no value when separated, construct a house when jointed together. (…) The letters are in front of you; take them from their neutrality and play with them like the beginner in the delirium of existence. The letters are restless, hungry for form, and form thirsts for meaning. (Mahmoud Darwish, *Absent Presence*, 15)

In October 2018 I started a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in the framework of the B-magic project on the history of the magic lantern as a mass medium in Belgium (www.B-magic.eu).[1] In this PhD I am investigating the history of the magic lantern, one of the first devices to project images for a broad audience. At the end of the nineteenth until the thirties of the twentieth century, the magic lantern was frequently used for colonial propaganda by missionaries and social reformers, constituting an image of whiteness that still lives on today. However, this article will not be an introduction into the subject of the magic lantern propaganda. Instead, it is intended to be a first methodological reflection of this research and describes a shift in this reflection from October until today. This shift is the result of several (ongoing) attempts to engage with the archival material I encounter, without reproducing the colonial gaze living on in these photographs on the one

hand, while also being conscious of my complicity in its (present) history on the other. Instead of looking at the representation of the Other, I made myself (explicit as) a research object/subject by looking at the manifestation of whiteness in these lantern slides, turning from an outside view to an inside perspective. Throughout the article, I will try to describe what such a double position could mean for a changed attitude within Theatre and Performance Studies and its methodologies. The guiding line for this changed attitude will be 'listening as critique', a concept that I borrow from Rolando Vázquez and that I will elaborate on in the second part. First, however, I will draw out where this need for alternative ways of listening comes from, sketching a critique of institutional listening.

I. Selective listening

Univers(al)ity

The art world can no longer rescind from the discussions on decolonisation coming from the African Diaspora in Belgium. Art schools and cultural institutions are trying to actively engage in this discussion, creating research groups or inviting external organisations to change their curricula and policies.[2] Also Theatre and Performance Studies at Ghent University and Université libre de Bruxelles, the universities where I graduated and work, are in need of a similar questioning of its content and structure. The way in which the discipline in these universities is taught, is still primarily based on western theories (Europe and the United States) of mostly white men, an inheritance to which this text still testifies. It is a knowledge that is mainly based on written sources and (theatre) performances coming from a European tradition. Also the methodologies of Theatre and Performance Studies, other than in research fields such as psychology, sociology or history, consists most of the time of theory. As a student I therefore did not quite capture what was meant by it. In a meeting with our department at ULB we discussed this lack of reflection in the curriculum on possible methodologies. We thought about making a manual for our students with some examples. Nevertheless, the proposed case-studies of theatre practices were work of almost exclusively white artists, performed in a white institutional framework. What does the focus on those performances mean for the way in which research is conducted? In questioning this, I do not try to formulate a one-way critique, as I am myself "part of the problem". I nevertheless ask myself: how can I talk about performances *outside* the institution while being *inside*? Or else: what could it mean, as Sara Ahmed puts it in her article on the phenomenology

of whiteness, "for a project of critique to be complicit with its object" (Ahmed 149)?

Performance Studies, coming from a North American tradition, already tried to break with the narrow definition of theatre by including daily spectacles, rituals and performances from other parts of the world (see for example Diana Taylor and Richard Schechner). It nevertheless attempts to (and must) remain critical about its privileged niche and about the way in which it analyses these other performances (see also Reinelt 2007). Methodologies such as Performance as Research (PAR) arose to counter the absence of methodological tools to engage with a field of practice, using methods from oral history and ethnography. Allowing criticism on their own position to come in, they consider the researcher as a participator or co-performer, taking in consideration their impact on the subject of analysis (Arlander et al.; Riley and Hunter). This anthropological tool is useful in order to situate oneself in the conversation, as it turns researchers back to themselves. Instead of hiding behind theory to define their position, it questions and makes explicit the (hierarchical) position from where they ask their (research) questions.

In her article on the decolonisation of Theatre and Performance Studies Sruti Bala looks at how the anecdote could be used to make the position of the researcher visible:

> I think the status of the anecdote in scholarship is itself worth considering. Often condemned as frivolous and marginal, deemed as closer to the genre of gossip than to scientific truth (and here one cannot help but notice the gendered connotations of such a dismissal), the anecdote has gained prominence in methodologies such as oral history and feminist ethnography and in the feminist emphasis on knowledge being intersubjective and situated (Haraway, 1988; Hesse-Biber, 2014). (…) To use the anecdotal story form in academic writing is thus not to claim a seamless, verifiable correspondence between experience and social reality, but rather, to make as visible as possible the grounds from which this perceived reality is discursively constructed. (Bala 335-336)

In that way, the anecdote serves not so much as evidence, but as a tool to demonstrate from where the posed questions arise. This makes it first and foremost possible to show how the theoretical position of the researcher is connected to its practical consequences and acts. Secondly, the anecdote as a

form of storytelling requires the addressee's listening ear and imagination for it to succeed. In a research lab, with more or less twenty people, a co-researcher and I did a first experiment with this form of storytelling, trying to include very concrete anecdotes that demonstrate some methodological pitfalls and difficulties within research in art and theatre history. After our talk we were exposed to questions and remarks about the nature of our presentation, coming solely from the four white male middle-aged researchers in the meeting room. Referring back to Bala's remark about the gendered connotations of the 'gossip' of anecdotal writing, we were *mansplained* (see also Solnit and Fernandez 2014) what an academic presentation should look like. They asked why we did not mention any theoretical references when addressing our practical concerns and as such forgot to make our position as a feminist, Marxist, or decolonial thinker clear.[3] When I made the hierarchies at play visible, I suddenly got applauded as the mad, straightforward or even 'vulnerable' woman. Instead of trying to think with us about the content of the anecdotes told, we were judged on the form of our presentation, only allowing us to join the conversation when playing by the classical rules of the academic game.

This academic way of (non) listening to other forms of knowledge and language must be strongly questioned. I do not claim to speak from the same position of the 'Other', keeping in mind my intersectional point of view in this context. This example nevertheless shows the difficulties of power dynamics in academic contexts. It could be questioned *if* the university will ever be an institute that can offer these alternative perspectives to uncover its own gaps, as long as it is predominantly white, male and western. Indeed, is it a context where one could listen to others at all? Bala outlines the complexity of this question. Inclusivity of others in the conversation does not necessarily mean that power is distributed equally. Think about the (mis)uses of concepts of 'listening to the Other,' 'giving a voice to the Other' or 'including the Other':

> Although the canon was successfully diversified through an additive logic, the inclusion of minoritized artistic practices into the canon ironically implied them being subject to specific configurations of both acknowledgment and disregard. (Bala 337)

The idea of inclusion sometimes seems liberating, as Bala explains, but it can be oppressing at the same time, maintaining the very same structures of power. The unwillingness to listen to other knowledges is often associated with a personal disinterest. Bala gives an example of one of her classes about Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o where she struggled to keep her students actively discussing one of Thiong'o's

texts. When a surprised South-African student asked where this disinterest came from, some students claimed that they simply did not feel related or were personally not interested in the subject as they "did not really know a lot about Africa". Comparing this attitude to what Gloria Wekker calls 'white innocence' (Wekker), the students' arguments make it seem as if their disinterest is neutral and thus innocent. In a guest lecture at Ghent University[4] where I first presented some ideas of this text, one of the students pointed out that there is a tendency to see the student as *undergoing* the curriculum, as well by the professors as by the students themselves. This passive attitude towards what is offered in the curriculum must not naively be answered with a shrug, as if it is arbitrary, as argues Bala: "[o]ne must be able to recognize that there is a connection between a supposedly personal disinterest in the topic and the threat of erasure that certain oral traditions face in different parts of the world" (Bala 340). The absence of other presences within the curriculum causes the possibility to see the canon or one's preferences as 'natural' and forms an excuse for a neglect of responsibility. The fact that Bala's students were disinterested, had not so much to do with 'a personal disinterest', but with the absence of other views and traditions in the curriculum of the university.

The blindness of universities to other knowledges does not solely demonstrate their narrow world view. It also attests of an unwillingness to let alternative views criticise their power structures, an unwillingness to listen as critique. KU Leuven's policy plan 2017-2021 demonstrates this. In *De Standaard* Carine Defoort argues how the plan encourages interdisciplinarity and internationalisation. Inter-regionality, however, is hardly addressed. The plan does not require universities to "think in other languages, learn to understand other concepts and sensitivities and look to the world from an alternative geopolitical context" (Defoort, "De zon is toch ook een ster": my translation). The absence of or even disinterest in other philosophies, languages or histories, attests to a selective interest of Belgian universities to listen to and to be interrogated by alternative worldviews. In the next part, I will look at the AfricaMuseum as an institute that publicly declared to decolonise itself "in all its dimensions" and what methods it uses (or does not use) to do so ('Waarom Renoveren?': my translation). Bearing in mind the efforts of some of the researchers to decolonise and change the museum, I will use the example of the AfricaMuseum to describe what I understand as selective listening that I oppose to listening as critique.

The rights of signification

On October 6th 2018 a replica of the statue of Leopold II on the Place du Trône started melting in the Baron Steens School in Brussels.[5] It is the artwork PeoPL by Laura Nsengiyumva, a Belgian artist and researcher who works extensively on decolonising the Belgian colonial past. The melting statue is a critique of the space that Leopold II occupies in the Belgian street scene. The melting of the ice and the temporal nature of the artwork contrast the stubborn (but often invisible) presence of the Belgian colonial past in public space. The performance would have been shown at the opening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren (former Royal Museum of Central Africa), December 8th 2019, but was ultimately cancelled. Dissolving the founder of the building into water did not seem suitable for the opening of a museum (Verbergt, "AfricaMuseum: naast een renovatie…") that is still partly sponsored by colonial successors such as mining company Umicore, the former *Union Minière de Haut Katanga* (Mathys et al.). These sponsors contributed to a renovation that took almost five years with a price tag of 66 million euros. As much as seventy percent of the renovation has gone to the restauration of the building and the addition of a new wing (which is the entrance of the renovated museum) designed by Stéphane Beel Architects in Ghent. The absurdity of this priority might have been a prediction of the negative reactions nowadays, but also shows the neglect of a critical attitude towards the continuity in contemporary colonialist structures.[6]

The AfricaMuseum seems to be very selective in the voices that it 'adds' to its story of Belgium's colonial past. While Nsengiyumva's proposal was denied for the opening, the museum hosts contemporary African and Belgian artists (of African descent), such as Chéri Samba, Sammy Baloji and Aimé Mpane. In 2013 COMRAF, an advisory body that represents the African diaspora within the museum, had recommended to invite external experts of African descent to attend the general meetings concerning the restauration. Although conflicting opinions were present among them as well, the six experts[7] attested that it looked like they were solely asked for approval of already established ideas, and experienced resistance once they came with their own contributions (Anne Wetsi Mpoma, "Décoloniser…"). The museum tried to justify this accusation, aiming to approach the continent from a 'scientific' point of view, presenting themselves as objective. Scientific neutrality was thus used as an excuse to reckon with the 'ideologically colored' view of the six experts (guided by their 'experience') (Vallet, "Het rommelt…"). In sharp contrast with the budget available for the architects, the experts did not receive any structural support: no remuneration except for a compensation of expenses.

The withholding attitude of the museum towards the restitution of African artifacts, stolen during the colonial era, is another example of this refusal of signification. At the end of September 2018 vzw Bamko-Cran sent an open letter to *De Standaard* and *Le Soir*, demanding the restitution of Congolese cultural heritage and criticising the presence of more or less 300 Congolese skulls in Belgium. They are located in institutions such as the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, in MusAfrica in Namur, but also in the institution where I am hosted, the Université libre de Bruxelles. The discussion regained public interest in Belgium as a result of the media attention for a report of two advisors of Emmanuel Macron, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. (Likewise the protest of many years against the colonial statues only recently gained attention through the media spotlights on the riots against the confederate statues in Charlottesville…) In their report, Sarr and Savoy asked for the restitution of 26 stolen objects belonging to Bénin.

During an RTL-debate concerning the issue of restitution in Belgium, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert from Bamko-Cran vzw protested against the argument of Yves-Bernard Debie, lawyer at Barreau de Bruxelles and specialist in arts rights, who claimed that

> [il] n'y a pas de question de racialiser le débat (…). Je vous dis que depuis un siècle si on est passé d'un art nègre à un art classique, c'est grâce aux fabuleux travaux de nos musées, aux travaux fabuleux de nos marchants. ("Rendre au Congo ce qui est au Congo" 2018, 12:26)

Debie describes, unconsciously but adequately, the process of signification – of appropriation and representation – by the European Museum: taking the object out of its original context, changing its previous meaning and imposing one's own. Robert explains how Debie himself turns it into a racial question, a question of hierarchies of power:

> Je trouve que c'est raciste ce que monsieur vient de dire. Pourquoi ? Parce que dans le définition de racisme, le racisme est un question de hiérarchisation. Monsieur dit qu'on est passé d'un art nègre, comme si c'était bas, à un art classique, grâce justement au blanc. ("Rendre au Congo ce qui est au Congo" 2018, 12:55)

Robert's criticism on Debie's statement resonates with some of the criticism on the old RMCA before its restauration. Researchers such as Jean Muteba Rahier, Herman Asselbergs and Dieter Lesage (Asselberghs and Lesage; Rahier) argue

that the museum presented the continent as primitive and wild through stuffed animals, the sound of crickets, traditional masks and racial statues, such as the *anioto* or leopard man. The museum places the African continent in the past, making it into an object to be classified and to be known through appropriation and an imposed chronology.

In his influential books *The Birth of the Museum* and *Past Beyond Memories* (Bennett 2013, 2004) Tony Bennett extensively elaborates on the modern museum as memory machine, constructing (colonial) unequal relationships between the self (Europe) and the Other (mostly the colonised countries) through representation. He argues that the performative context of the museum creates this hierarchy: the setting uses the past to determine the position of the visitor in the present (Bennett 2013, 186). Bennett calls this the *backtelling* of the museum: "[Evolutionary thought] also shaped the operation of the 'backtelling' structure of the museum's narrative machinery such that its address privileged men over women and white Europeans over black and colonized peoples" (Bennett 2013, 193). Indeed, the museum uses time to justify the hierarchy between child, male, female, or colonised people: defending their unequal relationship by placing them, as Bennett states, not below, but behind each other (Bennett 2013, 206). In that way it seems that this gap can be bridged through time, through reaching the level of 'development' of the one standing right in front, on their way to achieve the unifying world of the modern white male.

The argument of time, the 'new', the 'technological', and the 'scientific' versus the technological illiterate is still used to justify the presence of African artefacts in the museum. It reminded me of a fragment in the autobiography of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o where he remembers the protests of the Nandi against the construction of a railway while he is heading to Uganda in a train:

> Blood had been spilt by proponents and opponents of the railway. (…) The sprawling rolling hills and fields of coffee and wheat the railway line generated spoke of white presence, but they also spoke eloquently of African loss. I was benefiting from a history that had come to negate my history. (Thiong'o 20)

The colonisers consider that the technological is wanted by the colonised, something that is essentially 'good'. Europe wants African museums to wait until they are 'ready' for repatriation (remember Jef van Bilsen's thirty-year plan for the Congo) as if they were ahead of time, knowing what is best. In that way, Belgium

places itself in an all-knowing position, as parents for their child. In their open letter, Bamko vzw points at the hypocrisy of this argument: "Enfin, est-ce vraiment aux pays qui ont brûlé et détruit des objets culturels pendant les guerres coloniales de donner des leçons sur la sécurité et le respect dû aux œuvres d'art en Afrique?" (Kwandika de Bamko-Cran asbl 2018). It is highly patronising to claim to know the right place for these objects based on development, concealing the loss and destructiveness that the colonial regime has caused. Indeed, the arguments against restitution silence the other in the conversation, founded on a self-constructed hierarchy of time.

The AfricaMuseum seems to be willing to talk about 'the Other', but wants to keep the monopoly to impose meaning. In doing this, it forgets to question its own meaning-making. Bala argued for the danger of 'inclusivity' when it does not structurally change the canon, but solely promotes other voices in the spirit of diversity or representativeness. In their digital brochure 'Macht Herverdelen' or 'Redistributing Power', Angela Tillieu Olodo, Hajar Ibnouthen, Hari Prasad Sacré and Samira Hmouda discuss an alternative terminology that breaks with terms such as 'diversity' and 'interculturality.' In putting forward alternative vocabularies from outside the institutional frameworks, they argue that distributing power is only possible when the other at the table is able to re-appropriate the right of signification:

> [a]cknowledgement is not only a matter of listening, and accepting the perspective of someone else as truth, equal to yours, but also by structurally embedding and employing a nuanced terminology to speak about it. (Tillieu Olodo et al. 2018)[8]

Re-distributing power in that sense means to give away the power to attribute meaning to the world, but also to incorporate and discuss these methods and meanings in our schools, museums, and writings. Instead of representing a plurality of 'worldviews', these alternatives concern everyone and offer a better understanding of our world. Artists such as Faustin Linyekula, Grace Ndritu and Pascale Obolo put forward interesting alternatives and questions regarding the ways in which objects and performances take/get place within museums (Van Hassel, "Banataba"). If they had been listening to such artists, the renovation of the AfricaMuseum could have played a role in contemporary discussions in Museology, such as the status of the art object in the white cube or the museum as institution (see also Bishop 2013). Nevertheless, some voices point at the impossibility of such projects (see for example Ingabire 2018). Therefore a first (and in this case maybe only) step might have been deliberately showing the

museum as a colonial museum, turning the gaze towards the Other to oneself, to the colonialist in our own presumptions. In the next part, I discuss what this turn to ourselves could mean for an alternative way of listening.

II. Outside in, Inside out

Humbling conversations

Until now, I have mainly criticised two institutions: pointing at the missing (methodological) tools in the discipline of my research and mapping out the difficulties of incorporating other voices into decision-making. In the first part, it became clear how listening is always selective when the attitude towards the other (or the way in which power is distributed) does not change. In this part I argue that listening always goes hand in hand with a form of critique that obliges the listener to shift perspectives and change track. In this second part, I turn the critique back to my position as a researcher of colonial images. I will explain this shift in looking at images of 'Otherness' to images of 'Whiteness'. In his article on transitional justice, Berber Bevernage questions the possibility for historians to know where the past belongs: "Can we claim to know the proper place of the past or is this place rather the product of an act of putting in place and thus constituted performatively?" Bevernage stresses that the historian must rather take an indirect position without claiming expertise that permits him to "measur[e] time and determin[e] the hierarchy of time". (Bevernage 24) When doing research on images of the 'Other', I soon realised that the expertise may not so much belong to the researcher, but to the 'Other' *in* this image.[9] Then how does this change track?

In his article *Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity* Rolando Vázquez[10] proposes a kind of listening within the decolonial discussion that is based on relationality, and which opposes itself to the separating force of the categorisations by 'modernity/coloniality'.[11] Vázquez describes the European reflex to categorise and divide the world: literally by drawing borders outside of Europe since the conquests in the Americas and figuratively by making a distinction between the 'Other' and 'Self', human and nature, past and present. To illustrate the contemporaneity of these categorisations within contexts of listening, I want to give the example of an interview in the framework of 'Kinderen van de Kolonie' (launched in November 2018), one of the first (!) documentary programs on the atrocious history and legacy of the Belgian colonisation on national television. In the Flemish news show 'De Afspraak' on Canvas, Sandrine Ekofo, a Belgian-Congolese lawyer and writer on issues of

discrimination and postcolonialism, and Idesbald Goddeeris, professor of History at KU Leuven, were invited as guest speakers. Bart Schols, the show's host, addressed the emotional questions regarding the experience of racism to Ekofo. When talking about the history of colonisation, on the contrary, he directed himself explicitly to Goddeeris. This might seem 'normal' in the first place, as Goddeeris is a professor and has no experience with undergoing racism… but surely he has with having racist thoughts ('Kinderen van de Kolonie' 29:57). However, a division is made between objectivity and subjectivity, white (male) knowledge and black (female) experience. Exactly because Schols does not realise the categories from which he speaks, he cannot be conscious about his biased listening. Vázquez argues how humbling one's position in a conversation, opens the possibility to become conscious of one's prejudices. He describes a listening that is based on relationality, bridging the distance between the two participants and awakening consciousness about these classifications made:

> "Listening as critique" is not the artifice of a critique that judges and prescribes a utopia, nor the arrogance of a critique that denies hope; it is a critique that opens, that humbles, a critique that builds understanding in and through listening. (Vázquez 6)

Vázquez introduces the concept of *buen vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* to illustrate this connecting and humbling movement. *Buen vivir* or 'living in plenitude' is an indigenous concept in South and Central America that implies a *relationship* with nature, with the ancestors of the past and with its co-inhabitants in every act of daily life. Vázquez opposes the concept of *buen vivir* as a relational encounter between earth and human, against modernity's tendency to detach. Instead of a modern logic of separation, *buen vivir* is only possible through listening and relating the things that modernity separates (Vázquez 243; see also Acosta 2018). *Buen vivir* is a chasm for modernity in the sense that it dismantles the naturalness of these modern classifications. It connects different ways of knowing, visible and invisible, present and absent in order to break with western dichotomies (Vázquez 247). Thus, listening as critique, according to Vázquez, means to look for alternative ideas from outside of the tradition of modernity (those people who have been suppressed and shoved away from history) to uncover the blind spots of a Eurocentric discourse.

Vázquez shifts his gaze to the outside, looking to Europe from another point of view, Europe as 'Other'. With a similar outside gaze, bell hooks sketches in her *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination* bell hooks sketches an image of the white 'Other', arguing how she "found much writing that bespeaks the

continued fascination with the way white minds, particularly the colonial imperialist traveler, perceive blackness, and very little expressed interest in representations of whiteness in the black imagination" (Hooks 339). In the same logic it is striking to notice how in Belgium the history of the colonisation is mostly told from a white perspective. How much, then, does Belgium really know about its own past? Two Dutch artists Vesna Faassen and Lukas Verdijk noticed the Belgian disinterest for alternative voices within the history of Belgian colonisation. There had been not one Congolese historian who told the history of colonisation from their perspective that was translated into Dutch. Faassen and Verdijk therefore published a book "Quand on parle de la colonisation/ wanneer we spreken over kolonisatie", a first Dutch translation of that history written by five Congolese historians (Dia Nwembu Dibwe et al.).[12] On the one hand, there are too few (hi)stories from the colonisation that connect different perspectives, but on the other hand there is also a blindness for what is already there. Joachim Ben Yakoub and Wouter Hillaert argue in their article on white institutions in *Rekto:Verso* that "[i]t starts with pulling back, to see the centre as part of a much broader field. Soon it will appear that all the possibilities to congolise and decolonise already exist" (Ben Yakoub and Hillaert: my translation). Ben Yakoub and Hillaert point out how white institutions are always searching for ways to decolonise themselves, without looking at the alternatives that are already being practiced.

How can these other stories change the way in which history is told? How does this change the position of the white historian as well? hooks argues how white students are often amazed when black people look at white people with an ethnographic gaze. Often they state how this solely highlights difference, breaking with "a deep investment in the myth of 'sameness'". At the end of her article about the white 'Other' hooks cites Gayatri Spivak, concluding how white people too should learn "to occupy the subject position of the other" (Hooks 346). hooks argues how white people who shift the location of the 'ethnographic' gaze suddenly see the way in which whiteness terrorises the world, without seeing themselves as inherently bad.[13] In her *Niemand zal hier slapen vannacht*, Rachida Aziz makes a similar ethnographical history of the white 'Other': "Whiteness became interiorized. White people wear it as perfectly fitting pants. The acts and reflexes follow as a matter of course the way driving a car. That is the result of four hundred years of hammering and moulding." (Aziz 91: my translation) Could a movement from the outside 'Other' to the inside 'Other' (being subject and object of one's critique) then be a possible way to listen as critique?

The blurring of categories, pulling the gaze outside-in brings a third alternative to the binary categories that Vázquez proposes. However he argues that he does not speak about *buen vivir* in order to again 'incorporate, define, classify' (Vázquez 243), the re-use of only these two fixed categories, as Achille Mbembe argues

> (…) are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations. (…) The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that it produces are not only destined to become objects of representation. They are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable, and which one is thus officially forbidden to transgress. (Mbembe 1992, 3-4)

Mbembe rightly stresses that the constant reconfirmation of categories prevents the possibility to transgress and keeps these categories intact. By constantly reproducing an inside and an outside, Vázquez seems to reconfirm the binaries he tried to oppose. This has two consequences. Vázquez firstly tends to forget the in-between: people who have one foot in 'modernity', born and raised in Belgium, and one foot outside, often approached as 'outsiders', as the Belgian diaspora today. Secondly, by representing modernity as monolithic, Vázquez seems to neglect the tendencies *within* modernity who did utter criticism. The way that Vázquez denotes listening as critique does not declare how this critique from the outside concretely changes or affects the inside. If only looking at the outside, what histories at the inside of the archive are we overlooking and reconfirming?

Inside the Archive

In my PhD project, I look at how lantern slides were used by missionaries to raise funds and advocate the 'civilising' work that they were doing. I focus on a collection of more than 20.000 lantern slides in KADOC, an archive and research centre for religion, culture and society in Leuven. Their collection contains photographs of the missionaries in every continent, proudly showing their impact on religious practices, family life, education, industry and health care, only to name a few. The amount of slides in this archive hint at the impact of the missionaries in installing white structures and beliefs (and I am not solely referring to Christianity here) all over the world. Looking and writing about this material as 'evidence' of a colonial project, nevertheless seems only to reconfirm the message that it tried to convey. This thus raises the question of how I could approach this archival material without reiterating the patriarchal structures from which it regains its power, letting different histories perform and contest.

The 'problem' of the patriarchal archive has been raised by several scholars during the last decades.[14] In Performance Studies, scholars such as Rebecca Schneider and Diana Taylor engage in a discussion about the logic of the archive that defines performance as disappearance. In *Performance Remains* Schneider criticises Taylor's dual approach to the archive and the repertoire (Schneider 2011, Taylor 2003). Taylor makes a distinction between the archive and the repertoire as two ways of remembering the past. The repertoire is the embodied archive: performances, rituals, utterances, an embodied remembering, (see also the example of *buen vivir*) a kind of knowing that is still disowned in a lot of Western contexts. The *archive*, written material such as photos, letters or books, is the most dominant way of remembering the past, excluding other kind of knowledges. By claiming embodied knowledge as another kind of knowing the past, Taylor hopes to break the universal right of the archive on knowledge production and allusions to the past. She rightly questions the rights of signification in how and by whom history should be represented, as such sharply contesting the AfricaMuseum's scientific approach to history telling.

Schneider, however, points to the biases in Taylor's own thinking. She argues that Taylor might see performance 'as another kind of archive', but does not take into account the archive as 'another kind of performance.' In that way, the divide is again (although reversely) confirmed as a distinction between something that stays and something that disappears. The archive still keeps up the appearance of being static and unchangeable. Archive culture (based on categorising and conserving) exactly gains its power through this eternal preservation, pretending to be the unchangeable objective truth. Schneider therefore proposes not to think about the archive solely as something that preserves and therefore remains, but to see it as something that performs in and through time (constantly reconfirming certain dominant ideas and stereotypes). The idea of the archive as performative thus makes changes *within* the archive possible, constructing counter archives that offer alternative approaches to history. Such an alternative approach is practiced by The Black Archives in the Netherlands. They try to counter the occidental oriented archive by collecting the estate of black writers and scientists, consisting of archives, artefacts and books that have already been writing alternative histories ('The Black Archives' 2018).

The Black Archives thus makes a history visible that counteracts the monopoly of the archive by the white historian. Schneider explains how the archive is a live performance that constantly reproduces stereotypes of masculinity, femininity and race. This monumentality can only remain through the constant

confirmation by their passerby. In her article *The Patricide and the Passerby* Schneider engages with the archive of the city: the monuments as the visible signs of the past in public space. She elaborates on De Certeau's concept of the monumental. The monumentality of the monument, connected to the patriarchal, can according to De Certeau only exist by the passerby that passes on its secret (its presentation of the monumental as natural and timeless):

> To forget the live is to keep silent the monument's secret that it depends upon the passerby for its very monumentality. To forget the liveness of a monument allows the monument to pass as (to appear as if) timeless, as if monumental. The monument is composed in liveness. The passerby is the material of remains (Schneider 55)

The passerby confirms the secret of the monument not only by passing-by, but also by letting the monument pass as monumental, confirming its dominant master narratives.

Through unveiling the archive as performative, Schneider argues that it is actually possible to turn the proclivity of the archive to solely remain. Schneider links the thoughts of both Walter Benjamin and Michel De Certeau, connecting their resistance against the archive merely for preservation, obsessed with saving (Schneider 54-55). They see a promise and a possibility in the hidden secrets inside. Through rearrangements of its materials, shifting them around, copying and pasting (in other words re-searching), the secret can be not dis- but uncovered. This is what Benjamin calls a 'performative analysis.' For Benjamin this 'performative analysis' brings forward an unexpected appearance of details *within* archival material that were previously overseen (Schneider 160-161).

In his article *Ragpickers and Leftover performances* Frederik Le Roy elaborates on the 'performative analysis' and Benjamin's *Lumpensammler* or ragpicker. The ragpicker, another figure of alterity in modernity, collects the 'leftovers' (the *lumpen* or the rags) of history. In this act of collecting, going from one leftover to another, he creates an alternative view on society in contrast to those who walk by the pre-produced roads, following the capitalist structures of time and space. Benjamin argues that through these shifted focus on the leftovers, the ragpicker can uncover unexpected narratives or stories that were hidden under the grand narratives of history (Le Roy 131-132). For example, in her essay on slavery and anti-slavery campaigns in Australia, Jane Lydon indicates how the slavery photographs are a way for descendants to reconstruct their own histories:

> Aboriginal people give these disturbing images formerly unknown meanings in a range of practices that construct the past in the present, as they reveal ancestors lost during the displacements of colonialism, and substantiate Indigenous stories and experiences once hidden from view. (Lydon 247)

By changing perspective within and re-arranging the heaps of archive material, alternative histories take shape. Also the National Archive of the Netherlands started between 2010 and 2017 with a rearrangement of its material, through the transfer of the Surinam archives to the National Archive of Suriname. The online archives enable the Surinamese to retrace and reconstruct their own pasts, in terms of their ancestors and the slavery practices executed by their colonisers (Nationaal Archief 2010).

The city of Brussels, too, functions as an archive of colonial propaganda; however, there is no contextualisation whatsoever of all the colonial remnants passed by every day. An example of an organisation that takes up responsibility to break with the secret of the monument, rendering the leftovers in history visible in public space is *Collectif Mémoire Colonial et lutte contre les discriminations*, an anti-racist organisation founded in 2010. Through their *visites guidées*, *Mémoire Coloniale* wants to counter the indifference in Belgium to the colonial past:

> C'est essentiel aussi pour les jeunes générations issues de l'immigration africaine, qui doivent pouvoir grandir dans un pays qui reconnaît ce contentieux historique et assume ses responsabilités. Il est de la responsabilité de chacun, monde politique et monde associatif, de mieux connaître et de faire connaître aux Belges, issus ou non de l'immigration africaine, et aux étrangers vivant en Belgique, le passé colonial de notre la Belgique. (Mémoire Coloniale 2018)

In the – by now – ten walks through the city of Brussels, one of the members of the organisation tells the visitors the story of colonisation by passing past public colonial infrastructures such as monuments, statues and buildings (Mémoire Coloniale 2018). The guided city tours of *Mémoire Coloniale* unveil the secret of the monument by re-appropriating the represented history from another perspective. *Mémoire Coloniale* activates the passerby as complicit in negating its presence within public space. In that way *Mémoire Coloniale* shows what had been always already *within* this history, but had been willingly negated: making the absent present through a *collage* of walks. This marking and linking of the different statues in the city of Brussels makes the whiteness of the architecture

visible. It is in this performative gesture of alternative histories and neglected relations that whiteness becomes audible. This performative act obliges the statues (or the listeners in this guided tour) to change attitude, humbling the narrative that the statues try to convey. Listening as critique in that sense is a performative practice, constantly reconsidering the relationship between the different listeners and the stories.

Theatre and Performance Studies has potential tools for such performative listening in history writing, as it must constantly be aware of all kinds of performances within this process. Two things, then, are influencing my methodology on colonial images in missionary propaganda slides: first, how listening as a critique changes the performance of the archive. In KADOC the archives of the missionaries are separated according to congregate, medium, place or time. This separation makes it difficult to see how these different elements connect (and this is the separating logic of modernity described by Vázquez). The missing links, rendered invisible in the archive, conceal the impact of the colonial project. Within this tangible space, they make it possible to keep the master narrative simple (and monumental), instead of multiple and layered. Connecting these unnoticed links (such as between the other and self, past and present, different colonial spaces or organisations) and/or alternative histories of others, does not so much tell more about the 'Other' in the photograph, as it tells about what it tried to conceal as 'natural': the whiteness as a construction of ideas, values and prejudices. Listening, in this sense, means to be open to the alternative tracks that humble the archive, mirroring its own ideals. Secondly, these alternative stories could reveal something about the whiteness of the researcher, obliging me to constantly turn back to myself, be object *and* subject of my own investigation—the research subject objectifies the researcher (I think that this is almost always the case, but now we are rightly admitting it). Only through this double position I can think about my own complicity in my research on coloniality. When we listen as critique, conversations thus never really come to vast conclusions, but – as in a Möbius strip – move constantly between the outsides and insides of history, letting doubt and audibility join in the middle.

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[2] Among others KASK, Sint-Lucas, CAMPO, rekto:verso, Kaaitheater, some of those inviting initiatives like sCan&Do for an analysis of their organisation.

[3] In this essay I argue that positioning oneself arises through a constant questioning of those categories.

[4] The guest lecture took place on November 26, 2018 in the framework of the seminar *Contemporary Performance Theory* by Frederik Le Roy at Ghent University.

[5] See also the article "PeopL: colonial Haunting and Decolonial Dreams" in *rekto:verso* of Kopano Maroga (Maroga 2018)

[6] November 2018 Benjamine Laini Lusaluna, Jeanne Coppens, Léa Grégoire and Arshia Azmat presented their Decolonial Zine *Kumbuka* at Le Space where they think about alternative spaces to remember the past (Benjamine Laini Lusaluna et al.). The Zine expresses strong criticism toward the museum and contains essays of Françoise Vergès, Anne Wetsi Pmoba, Simone Zeefuik, Anissa Boujdaini, Sonia Nour, Sabrine Ingabire, and so on.

[7] The six external experts were Toma Muteba Luntumbue, Gratia Pungu, Anne Wetsi Mpoma, Billy Kalonji, Ayokof Mensa and Emeline Uwizeyimana.

[8] Translated from Dutch: "Erkenning is dan niet alleen een kwestie van luisteren, en het perspectief van een ander aanvaarden als een waarheid, gelijkwaardig aan die van jezelf, maar ook het structureel verankeren en hanteren van een genuanceerde terminologie om daarover te spreken."

[9] During the moment of finishing this article, I attended a lecture of Hari Sacré about other researchers that worked on the concept of listening (this again makes clear the gaps in my knowledge of other writers). Sacré is researching 'A Pedagogy of ~~Decolonizing~~ Listening' at Ghent University and elaborates on the concept of 'listening', for example looking at Trinh T. Minh-ha.

[10] Rolando Vázquez is an associate professor in Sociology at the University College Roosevelt (University of Utrecht). Together with scholars such as Walter Mignolo and Maria Lugones he organises the yearly decolonial summer schools. He is part of a group of Latin American thinkers who have extensively elaborated on the concept of 'decoloniality' distinguishing themselves from postcolonial and postmodern theory (see also Mignolo and Walsh).

[11] Modernity/coloniality is a concept introduced by Anibal Quijano in the article "Coloniality and modernity/rationality" and later elaborated by Walter Mignolo. These group of theorists, sometimes referred to as the decolonial school or decolonial network, see coloniality not only as a consequence of, but as constitutive for modernity. Locating the beginning of modernity around 1492 with the 'conquest' of the Americas, these thinkers see coloniality as the precondition of modernity by making Europe the centre of the world, and subjugating the others as Other (see also Mignolo; Dussel; Quijano).

[12] Also the recent film of Matthias De Groof and Mona Mpembele, *Palimpsest*, is exemplary in how to look at Belgium from an outside perspective. The film documents the restauration of the AfricaMuseum, but does this mainly through the eyes of Congolese or Belgo-Congolese people.

[13] See also Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), an already established field of study that occupies itself with the question of whiteness. Its overarching goal is to make visible the structural ways in which whiteness manifests itself.

[14] Ironically, this discourse is predominantly based on the patriarchy of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin or Michel De Certeau. Other writings on the archive can also be found in the work such as that of Ariella Azoulay, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, or Aleida Assmann.