

Translation and Memory in the Humboldt Forum: The Alternative Museum Space in Priya Basil's Film Essay "Locked In and Out"

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Abstract: *The film essay "Locked In and Out" by Priya Basil, created for and premiered at the digital opening of the Humboldt Forum in December 2020, reflects on Basil's own positionality in relation to the contested museum project, situating the Forum within a transnational framework. Basil's text creates an alternative museum space in which she not only intermingles colonial histories with narratives of resistance across time and space, but also exposes the mechanisms of curation behind the museum, and memory cultures more broadly. Reading the film essay at the intersection of Michael Rothberg's concepts of multidirectional memory (2009) and the implicated subject (2019), I observe how it challenges the selective memory of the museum, and of the nation, particularly as regards German colonialism. As a series of translations across multiple positionalities, between German and English, and through time, the text facilitates a meditation on the instabilities of national and singular frameworks for approaching colonialism, which are often propagated by museums and the narratives they construct. This paper seeks to untangle the translations and memories in Basil's film essay, bringing it into conversation with the contemporary debate on museums and (de)colonisation in Germany to consider how the text complicates national memory discourses which are re-emerging and being re-evaluated in the wake of the Humboldt Forum.*

Keywords: decolonisation; the Humboldt Forum; the implicated subject; multidirectional memory; museums

Introduction

In her film essay "Locked In and Out", Berlin-based writer, activist, and curator Priya Basil addresses themes of colonialism, cultural memory, and transnationalism in the context of the Humboldt Forum. The first and last images of the museum building shown in the video are blurry reflections in the water (Basil 2021, 00:38, 30:54). Through the rippling effect, the initial image of the museum's modern façade appears in motion, its edges and contours unfixed. The final reflection depicts the dome, adorned with a five-meter-high cross and a

biblically-inspired script composed by Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV. The recreation of this particular feature of the building has created controversy, not least because of connections between Christianity, proselytisation, and the supposedly civilising aims of colonialism (Beer 2022, n.p.). In referencing this aspect of the building only in reflection, Basil interrupts the surety and stability of this temporal connection to Enlightenment principles and Christian values and calls into question their relevance for the decolonial discourse the Humboldt Forum supposedly seeks to embody. Both images ultimately work as tropes: they are incomplete, unsatisfying, and offer a contrast to the aesthetic marketing the museum had undertaken leading up to its opening. The Forum's Instagram account did, and still does, though currently to a somewhat lesser extent, display countless pictures of the museum building, fetishising the space and the fact that the building itself, one of the most contested aspects of the entire project, unapologetically stands (Humboldt Forum [@humboldtforum], n.p.). Indeed, the building's newest incarnation is a provocation. It sits on the site of both the former City Palace (Stadtschloss) and the Palace of the Republic (Palast der Republik), and is thus multiply entangled in Germany's national history.

The conflicting erasure and resurgence of the histories of Empire and post-war divided Germany signified by these previous structures have charged the very image of the building with multiple meanings, which the Humboldt Forum in fact utilises in its programming and digital content.¹ Along these lines, German Studies scholar Adrienne Merritt has commented on the "narratological control" (2010b, n.p.) exercised by the Humboldt Forum whereby it "masks" the colonial and violent histories connected with the building, its objects, and its geographic location (2010a, n.p.). Archaeologist George Okello Abungu has observed that the architecture of the building plays a disproportionate role in debates around the Forum making them a discourse which "at times has been focused more on the building than the proposed content and what it stands for" (2021, 113). Within this context, it appears that the building is indeed in motion, blurry, undefined, this newest iteration embodying and yet also obscuring multiple legacies. In this way, Basil subverts the power of the building's image throughout the film essay, assuming her own narratological control in order to make explicit the transnational connections to the histories and memories entangled in the building.

This article reflects on Basil's film essay as a productive complication of the contemporary discourse surrounding museums, memory, and (de)colonisation. Basil engages with the museum through a process of self-questioning that positions her as both a British postcolonial subject who was born in London to parents from India and raised in Kenya, as well as a dual British and German citizen since 2018 (Basil, n.p.), thus situating the Forum within a transnational framework. My interest in the Humboldt Forum and in Basil's film essay also emerges from an insider-outsider positioning to German memory culture, as both a U.S. citizen raised and socialised there and as a resident of Germany for the past five years. The question of to whom collective German

memory belongs, lies at the core of Basil's film essay and my reflection on it. In considering both its visual and verbal narrative levels, I argue that the text creates an alternative museum space, a contact zone which challenges the selective memory and narratological authority of the museum and makes room for multiple memory cultures and historical demands and responsibilities to "clash" and "grapple" with each other (Pratt 1991, 34). Bringing the text into conversation with Michael Rothberg's conceptualisations of multidirectional memory and the implicated subject as well as Sumaya Kassim's, Dan Hicks', and Achille Mbembe's writings on museums and colonial legacies, the following will explore how the film essay's invocation of German and British memory cultures forges transnational and multidirectional ways of remembering within the space of the museum, uncovering and translating colonial continuities in the German context. By reading the film essay as an alternative museum space, I connect this to the "malleable discursive space" Rothberg writes of when referring to multidirectional memory in the public sphere (2009, 9). In this case, the public space of the museum is used to reshape the personal implicated-ness Basil explores in her own self-location to form a way of thinking about implicated-ness on a national German level that goes beyond the dominant narratives of German memory culture. Ultimately, the translations within the text across multiple positionalities, between German and English, and through time facilitate a meditation on the instabilities of national and singular frameworks for approaching colonialism, which are often propagated by museums and the narratives they construct.

In the first section, I situate the Humboldt Forum within contemporary discourses on "decolonising the museum" and German colonial history and consider the ways in which museums curate and control memory, particularly on a national cultural level. Building on the aspect of curation, the second section explores how Basil creates an alternative museum space in her film essay and how, with Rothberg's notions of "multidirectional memory" and "the implicated subject", this can be understood as a space which makes German colonial history and its present continuities explicit. In the third section, I address the translations between national memory cultures within the film essay and analyse how this multidirectional framework creates space for reworking German memory culture, before concluding with several thoughts on the possibilities for repair opened up by Basil's film.

Curating Memory and Decolonisation

From its beginning, the Humboldt Forum has been a highly contested project. Cultural anthropologist Friedrich von Bose has written about the fifteen years of public debate that preceded the decision to tear down the Palace of the Republic and reconstruct the Prussian City Palace in July 2002, describing it as "one of the most heated architectural debates of recent years both nationally and internationally" (2013, n.p.). Owing to its multiple historical layers, the site can be read as a contact zone for the remembering and forgetting of previous

iterations of the German nation. First, it is built on the site of the former City Palace, which was residence to the Hohenzollern Dynasty, rulers of Prussia and later the German Reich, including its colonial empire (Sieg 2021, 49). Furthermore, as the introduction to the publication *No Humboldt 21!* explains, the Palace was tied to Berlin-Brandenburg's involvement in the slave trade and to Chancellor Otto von Bismark, who hosted the 1884-85 Africa Conference in Berlin (AfricAvenir 2017, 7). It is not just the way the reconstruction closely resembling the Berlin Palace remembers and even exults German imperialism that have made the project contested, but also the intention to display colonial loot in spite of long-standing claims for restitution.² Historian Fatima El-Tayeb puts it succinctly by stating that the restoration of the Berlin Palace is "meant to represent a new direction after Germany's twentieth-century missteps back to a tradition of poets and philosophers supposedly more representative of the nation than the decades of national socialism and communism" (2020, 79). An additional layer to the protests against the project has to do with the site's significance for East Germany. The Humboldt Forum is also built on the site of the former Palace of the Republic, which was constructed between 1973 and 1979 after the City Palace was bombed in February 1945 and fully destroyed in 1950 by the East German government (Prokasky 2020, 17-19). Considering how the Palace of the Republic was the seat of the East German Parliament and a key architectural feature of East Berlin (Sieg 2021, 49), the decision to rebuild the City Palace in its place seems to want to forget the postwar period of a divided Germany and, by extension, the period of National Socialism that preceded it.

The ghosts and historical legacies of the Humboldt Forum's site have accompanied the conversations surrounding it, one notable example being Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's keynote speech in September 2021 at the opening of the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art in the Humboldt Forum. In her speech, Adichie not only openly calls out Europe's colonial crimes and its collective refusal to acknowledge colonial histories (2021, 4:23-5:40), but also the protestors standing outside the Humboldt Forum at the time of her speech (2021, 10:54-11:06) and the museum's propensity to endlessly plan and talk rather than act when it comes to decolonising practices (2021, 11:07-11:14). Referencing the history of the building, she states, "this building says that German history matters" (2021, 7:49-7:52) and then quite powerfully that "Germany is Beethoven, Germany is Bach, and Germany is also its colonial atrocities" (2021, 10:05-10:14). Adichie insists European nations build their national identities on a more complete version of remembered events and in doing so, references a wholeness or thoroughness of collective national memory that is unattainable, but worth working toward. However, her speech is also an implicit endorsement of the museum and demonstrates a willingness to acknowledge it as a legitimate institution, which many protestors and activists do not.³ Ending her speech with a plea for courage and hope, Adichie seems tepidly optimistic that such a space can be a productive force in the reparation of colonialism, posing the open

question: “Can it [the Humboldt Forum] become, among other things, a project of remembering?” (2021, 18:45-18:50).

Adichie’s speech is one contribution to a larger discourse on “decolonising” the museum which has been and is still taking place in museums located predominantly in Europe and North America that are implicated in the perpetuation of colonial violence. Sumaya Kassim, co-curator for Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery’s decolonial exhibition “Birmingham and the British Empire: The Past is Now” in 2017-18, argues in her essay “The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised” that the project of decolonisation and the institution of the museum are inherently incompatible. While the term “decolonisation” itself has become somewhat ubiquitous in its use as a label to define projects and policies undertaken by universities and cultural institutions that broadly relate to diversity and inclusion, many intellectuals and activists have spoken out against this appropriation of the concept. Prominent among them are Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang who have written: “we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonisation” (2012, 3). Decolonisation is a project that Kassim describes as “almost always painful” (2017, n.p.). Furthermore, she poses the question of whether museums “are so embedded in the history and power structures that decoloniality challenges, that they will only end up co-opting decoloniality” (2017 n.p.). Decolonisation’s application to the institution of the museum is thus quite contested. While I do not necessarily seek to address the question of whether the Humboldt Forum can be decolonised within this article, I will explore how Basil’s film essay, when read within the current discourse on the role of ethnographic museums in addressing colonial legacies, may offer new reflections for the dependencies between memory culture, (de)colonisation, and reparation in the German context and how a transnational, multidirectional approach to German memory culture might productively intervene.

In many ways, the museum can be thought of as a colonial tool used to categorise and *other* colonised peoples, objects, and cultures. Katrin Sieg, author of the *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum*, describes museums as part of “colonial power relations” (2021, 4) and notes that “[t]he great public museums built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries preserved imperial cognitive maps until well after official decolonization” (5). Indeed, museums such as the Humboldt Forum continue this colonial legacy and perpetuate colonial and racializing logics in the ways they address museum viewers, mediate knowledge about “other” peoples and societies, and construct national narratives that often exonerate much more than they hold accountable. In his publication *The Brutish Museums*, archaeologist Dan Hicks writes of museums as “institutions complicit in a prolongation of extreme violence and cultural destruction, indexes of mass atrocity and iconoclasm and ongoing degradation” (2020, 4), making a provocative statement against the refusal of British museums in particular to restitute violently stolen objects like the Benin Bronzes. And perhaps most poignantly, Aimé Césaire, with whose words Hicks begins his monograph, states

“And what of the museums, of which Europe is so proud? It would have been better, all things considered, if it had never been necessary to open them” (Hicks 2020, xi). On the level of how they operate and through the fact of their very existence, European ethnographic museums in particular are tied to colonialism. Yet, the narratives created and exhibited within museums often distract from this fact, without the visitor even realising it. Eilean Hooper Greenhill writes of the “axis of visibility”, noting how the relationships of subject and object in the museum space are ingrained so deeply that they seem “given” or “natural” (1992, 7). The museum curator is opposite to the museum visitor, controlling what they see and how they see it, all while remaining invisible.

The narrative exhibited by the Humboldt Forum, however, extends beyond the actual exhibits. The museum also curates its own understanding of national memory and of decolonisation, particularly through its digital presence. The website section on “Colonialism and Coloniality” (Humboldt Forum (n.d.)a, n.p.), the online magazine with the feature “... a world in which coloniality no longer has a place” (Humboldt Forum (n.d.)c, n.p.), and the image of a sweatshirt with the emblem “Decolonise” (Blankenstein et al., 2021, n.p.) all demonstrate a perplexing, nefarious awareness of the controversies surrounding the Humboldt Forum. The institution attempts to mitigate these controversies by creating as well as curating ample space for dialogue, ultimately meant to be consumed. Yet it would seem that the dialogue is always already an implicit endorsement to be (mis)used as an advertisement for the institution, which in its appropriation of all dialogue and critique, seems to consume its visitors, discussants, and even its protestors and critics. Wan wo Layir’s highly critical essay “The Palace We Go to Die In” in the aforementioned online magazine observes “The Humboldt Forum seems to gain life from the dialogue that should be killing it” (2022, n.p.), acknowledging that their essay is also part of this commodification and consumption of decolonial discourse. In this way, the Humboldt Forum appears to be curating its own supposed “decolonisation” without ever really acknowledging memories of German colonialism into its framework. As Kassim highlights, museums do not only keep certain events in the collective memory, but they also contribute to intentional forgetting (2017, n.p.). In fact, the “Colonialism and Coloniality” section of the Forum’s website does not contain any detailed information on the history of German colonialism, such as where and in which time period Germany held colonies, the atrocities and violence committed there, and by whom such violence was committed, funded, and supported. And so, the attempts to curate memory and decolonisation through the project evade any true remembering of the colonial period and its continued impacts.

The Humboldt Forum emerges in a discourse surrounding German colonialism that itself often distracts from the facts. This discourse is characterised by relativistic statements such as “it only lasted 30 years”, “Germany had much fewer colonies”, “Germany was not nearly as bad as the others, such as Britain, France, or Spain”, and so on (Bremer 2021, 9; my

translation). Adichie's speech recollects how the European narrative of colonialism is too often phrased as "Yes, colonialism happened, but...", which shifts the focus away from colonialism while pretending to address it (2021, 6:24-6:58). Similarly, the conversation around German colonialism often undercuts itself. For example, historian Britta Schilling points out that there is a tendency to consider German colonialism as a "Sonderweg" or "separate path" since Germany acquired its colonies comparatively late and that Germany "was the first modern European imperial nation to become post-colonial, having been forcibly decolonized following the First World War" (2015, 427). The use of "post-colonial" here overlooks how the loss of its colonies at the end of the First World War cannot be assumed to have contributed to the development of a critical or self-reflexive postcolonial discourse in Germany. The approach to German colonialism as a unique case has also impacted understandings of postcolonialism in the German context. For instance, cultural studies scholar Monika Albrecht distinguishes the nature of German postcolonialism from that of other European countries. She writes about the absence of "living reminders" (Albrecht 2014, 45) of the colonial past in today's Germany and asserts, "If Germany does not have any noteworthy immigration from its former colonies, this means that the minorities in Germany do not share a colonial history with the native German population" (48). And yet, this particular understanding of colonial continuities overlooks other ways in which the structures and knowledges of colonialism are perpetuated in present-day Germany, such as through cultural memory, racist ideologies, as well as in institutions like museums. The perspective(s) from which Basil explores colonial continuities in her film essay demonstrates how memory traverses national boundaries and shows both that postcolonialism disallows a strictly national lens, and that colonial histories cannot be considered separately from other decisive events in a nation's memory culture.

The overwhelming media coverage and public attention surrounding the Humboldt Forum has come to represent the national conversation on colonial memory, postcolonialism and decolonisation in Germany. In an anthology on postcolonialism and cultural heritage, another example of the museum's self-curated "decolonisation", Natalia Majluf remarks,

The Humboldt Forum itself, as an institution of the German government, is framed as its representative. In so many ways, whether they are made explicit or not, the ties that bind museums to the idea of the nation remain one of the key operating frameworks for the work they do. (2021, 16-17)

The Humboldt Forum's engagement with colonialism and colonality thus reflects on German national memory discourses which are re-emerging and being re-evaluated in the current moment. Notable contributions are Max Czollek's highly critical publications on German memory culture surrounding the Holocaust, most recently *Versöhnungstheater*, as well as conversations instigated by the 2021 translation of Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* into German, including Dirk Moses' 2021

polemic article “The German Catechism” and Mirjam Brusius’ 2022 special issue “Memory Cultures 2.0: From Opferkonkurrenz to Solidarity.” Located in the capital of present-day Germany on the site of former buildings of national significance to multiple iterations of the German nation, the Forum is part of a national act of active remembering and active forgetting (Assmann 2010, 98). Basil emphasises this as well in her initial framing of the Humboldt Forum, when she considers how “the sense of what it means to be German, in Europe, in the world” has been renegotiated during the period of the Forum’s construction, namely between 2013-2020 (2021, 1:30-1:45). What makes Basil’s film essay such a productive intervention into this debate is the transnational, multidirectional framework she uses, established by her own self-location in respect to the Humboldt Forum. In doing so, she questions the narrative of the Humboldt Forum, and by extension, the narrative of German memory culture, that is marked by the conspicuous absence of colonialism. Situating the history of colonialism within her understanding of German collective memory, Basil exposes cracks in her initial impression of Germany as “the society that knows how to remember” (2021, 13:35-13:44) and questions the promise of what she calls “the wiedergutmachen mentality” (2021, 13:59-14:01).

An Alternative Museum Space

While the museum is a place where meticulously curated narratives are disseminated to the visitor, Basil’s film essay interrupts this act of curation to expose the silenced narratives and historical complexities of the Humboldt Forum. An important way in which she does this is by setting her video in the period of the Forum’s construction, providing a visual narrative of change and potential which corresponds with her audio narration of the film essay interrogating the project’s controversies and the options available for responding to them.⁴ This visual narrative includes ample footage of the building under construction, which obstructs the view of the museum building and its interior, at times accompanied by the loud noises of construction (Basil 2021, 17:39; 18:15). By entering the museum space during its construction phase, Basil disrupts usual processes of observation and knowledge production in museums, creating an alternative museum space. While the museum may, as Alice Procter notes, “distill narratives” (2020, 9) and act as an authoritative source of knowledge, or even, as Shaheen Kasmani puts it, exist as a “celebration of colonialism” (Birmingham Museum 2017, 16:18-16:27), the alternative museum space constructed in Basil’s film essay destabilises any sense of authority and finality and complicates rather than simplifies national, colonial, and supposedly decolonial narratives. In this way, the contested nature of the building itself and its role in the Humboldt Forum narrative stand in the centre, perpetually not-yet-finished and therefore susceptible to intervention and deconstruction, even after the construction has been completed and the museum is receiving visitors.

Within the alternative museum space, colonial temporalities are also interrupted through the subversion of viewing practices. Hicks conceptualises museums as “devices for extending events across time” (2020, 15), bringing attention to the fact that museums are just as colonial and violent as they were when they were created. Storing and displaying stolen objects prolongs the violence of colonialism and is evidence of the continuities that are still present in today’s Germany. As a result, entering the museum means stepping into this long legacy of colonialism, and by looking at the objects situated in display cases, participating in the continuation of acts of colonial violence. Yet Basil’s film essay intervenes in the continuation of violence to insert additional histories into the space through images of protest and resistance to the Forum’s existence (2021, 2:08) and photographs documenting German colonialism (9:10, 9:24). Through the insertion of these images, the alternative museum space makes German colonial history and its present continuities in the Humboldt Forum explicit. At one point, Basil suggests we reconceive of objects as “belongings”, so as to highlight the aspects of “possession, being, and longing” contained within them (2021, 4:06-4:34). This translation from “object” to “belonging” reorients the viewer’s understanding of what the museum displays away from something to look at or to consume, and toward something that is connected to a person or community. During this part, the viewer sees footage of the Forum’s basement, under construction, upon which a black and white image of a museum display case, packed with ethnographic “objects” is shown (2021, 4:16). Here, the act of viewing is orchestrated, but in a way to make the viewer uncomfortable. Confronted with this image, the perversity of stuffing the glass case so full that the individual stories and meanings of each piece are impossible to recount to the viewer becomes clear. In addition to these images, Basil shows the viewer blurry reflections (2021, 23:47), ample video footage of construction on the building (18:20), scaffolding (9:35), and empty display cases (22:39), withholding the object of the viewer’s gaze and redirecting them to look at the museum space in a new way. In doing so, Basil plays with the axis of visibility, exposing the careful construction undertaken by the museum curators (Hooper Greenhill 1992, 7). By not showing the objects, Basil draws even more attention to them, not as pieces of art or historical artifacts, but as material items held hostage in the museum space, incongruent with a memory culture that does not acknowledge how they got there (2021, 6:30). Refusing to show the contested belongings in their displays, the film essay unmasks the constructed and fabricated nature of the museum space, disrupting the authority and stability of the museum as an educational and national historical institution.

It is, however, not just the museum space which is shown to be implicated in colonial/imperial histories, but it is also the museum visitor, who in a sense sets foot into the alternative museum space while watching the video. Michael Rothberg has coined the term implicated subject, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the museum-goer as neither victim nor perpetrator, but participant (2019, 1). While museum visitors can hardly be held accountable

for the stealing and looting of objects during colonisation, their visits to the museum uneasily correspond with the continuation and elongation of the moment of colonial violence Hicks refers to. Conflicting temporalities are an important factor of implication, which is defined in part by pasts in the plural that intrude, destabilise, and haunt, as is the case in Basil's film. Basil observes how the museum "forces a repositioning of self within entangled histories that stretch in all directions from the belongings held there" (2021, 19:30-19:40). In this sense, the alternative museum space can be understood as a contact zone where multiple memories and claims on the past that are embodied by and carried with the individuals who visit the space "clash" and "grapple" within the asymmetrical power relations of the museum (Pratt 1991, 34).⁵ In locating herself in relation to the Humboldt Forum, Basil allows for multiple pasts to coexist and be intertwined. From the beginning of the film essay, she notes how her family has been "propelled by the forces of Empire" (Basil 2021, 0:49-0:55) in moving from India, to Kenya, and then to Britain. Yet she also considers the ways in which she is implicated to engage with the Forum and to intervene in German memory culture as a German citizen and a resident of Berlin.

The insertion of these varying memories and the legacies of violence, perpetration, and victimhood that come with them demonstrate Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory. Indeed, Basil translates between British and German memory cultures to gesture toward a practice of memory that decentres the single, national narrative and demonstrates an "ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" of memory (Rothberg 2009, 3). Just as Rothberg writes of memory as multidirectional, he also conceptualises implication as multidirectional.

Thinking in terms of implication also helps draw further attention to how practices of memory – even multidirectional practices – intersect with power dynamics, forms of complicity and distancing, and risks of forgetting. Yet, tracking the multidirectionality of memory also illuminates the position of implicated subjects, because the border-crossing nature of remembrance alerts us to unexpected layerings of history and indirect forms of responsibility. (2019, 26)

Basil's narration as both a British postcolonial subject and a German citizen can be read as a negotiation of her subjectivity and implicated-ness in relation to multiple strands of German memory culture, including histories of colonialism and fascism. In remembering plural pasts, Basil crosses national borders and speaks from a multi-located position, illustrating how memory operates as a resource which "can help make implication visible" (Rothberg 2019, 11). The use, then, of different memory discourses and the temporalities that accompany them in the text's visual and verbal narratives exposes implications on a personal level that are then mirrored on the macro-levels of the museum and German national identity. If implication is a way of recognising or reading continuities across time and across national boundaries, then it becomes a way to speak more concretely about German colonialism and postcolonialism and counter the aforementioned self-undercutting discourse. In the following section, I will trace

the multidirectional framework which allows Basil to critically reflect on and offer space for reshaping German memory culture.

Multidirectional Memory Culture

The alternative museum space created by the film essay disrupts the Humboldt Forum's narrative by curating a space for contact and translation between national memory cultures and histories. Within the film essay's narrative, Basil translates across her own multiple positionalities with respect to the Humboldt Forum, between German and English, and through time to destabilise the museum's national frameworks for remembering and replaces them with a multidirectional one. The film essay itself exists in two iterations, both in English as "Locked In and Out" and in German as "Eingeschlossen / Ausgeschlossen". The text thus already contains a multiplicity, an acknowledgement of its multidirectional engagement with memory and a performance of Basil's multiple belongings. Basil also begins the film essay in a mode of translation, explaining how the German word "Schloss" means both palace and lock (2021, 00:09-00:16) and that the English word "belonging" means both "a condition of affinity, a secure relationship to a person, place or thing" and "possession" (2021, 00:17-00:28). These concepts serve as touchpoints throughout the film essay and establish a practice of translating both literally from German to English and across multiple definitions in English and German, as well as through the film as a process of explaining and adapting across national frameworks.

The sensitivity to national frameworks is created in part through multiple references to citizenship. Basil first connects the notion of "belonging" to the concept of citizenship, noting that the idea of "who counts as a citizen, who can belong" has become contested in Germany (2021, 1:46-2:05). This has in fact been contested for a long time, as El-Tayeb has written about, noting a perpetual "confusion" of Germanness with whiteness, which was legislated and enforced during the German colonial period (2004, 186-7). Basil then goes on to describe the process of taking the German citizenship test and swearing an oath, exposing the concept of citizenship to be highly constructed. That Basil draws attention to how she "became" a German citizen subverts any understanding of citizenship based on blood, which has only recently been recognised by the change in 2000 to the German citizenship law (El-Tayeb 2004, 186). As such, Basil demonstrates national belonging as multiple, subject to change, and not necessarily tied to one's birth. From the start, Basil's personal reflections speak to a national level of memory and implication, while simultaneously undermining conclusive understandings of the nation. As sociologist and museum studies scholar Tony Bennett remarks, museums have long been places where citizenship is performed through education, conversation with others, and the viewing of objects (2008, 121). Situating the personal narrative within the paradigm of citizenship is particularly interesting, especially with a view toward contemporary scholarship critiquing the practice of citizenship in Europe. Considering El-Tayeb's assertion

that “Europeans of color are produced as ‘queer,’ ‘impossible’ subjects in heteronormative discourses of nation” (2011, xxxv), Basil’s narrative in the film essay then produces her identity as German, British, Indian diasporic, and a Person of Colour, implicitly challenging the discourse of the nation.

Basil then reflects on how becoming a German citizen for her meant inheriting German cultural memory. She explains how at the moment of obtaining German citizenship her husband said to her that this particular national belonging comes with responsibility for the Holocaust (Basil 2021, 5:23-5:29). Basil then narrates, “I was feeling an awful weight. The past had acquired a different charge. A history I had studied as a guest of sorts, had become mine to host” (2021, 5:39-5:51). Describing a country’s burden to remember as something that can be inherited by those arriving, coming from other places with various histories and memories, Basil highlights the ongoing negotiation of concepts like national memory, which are stretched and reshaped by those implicated in remembering. These reflections take place within the visual and discursive space of the Holocaust Memorial near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. As the camera walks the viewer unsteadily through the memorial, the concrete blocks rise higher and higher and impede the viewer’s ability to see anything beyond the narrow path that is left between them (2021, 5:30-6:26). It is particularly interesting that this section is filmed outside of the museum, referencing Berlin as a larger landscape of musealised spaces for thinking through German memory culture and once again drawing connections between Basil’s personal implicated-ness and that of Germany more generally. This is echoed at another point slightly later in the film when Basil triangulates between the Humboldt Forum, the Holocaust Memorial, and Wilhelmstrasse 92. The latter is the site of the former Reichschancellory where the Berlin Conference took place in 1884-85 (Basil 2021, 24:18-24:49). This implicates not only Berlin, and by extension Germany, in histories of perpetration, but it also shows how the implications stretch out from Berlin to other European countries who were gathered at the Berlin Conference. The inclusion of these additional memorial sites embeds both the Humboldt Forum and Germany in a transnational and multidirectional history of colonialism.

Basil reflects further on German memory culture after the Holocaust and the principle of “Wiedergutmachen”, which she translates as “to make good again, through reparation, restitution, remorseful remembrance” (2021, 6:31-6:33). Remarks on how this approach seemed “exemplary” are accompanied by images of the Humboldt Forum under construction, of various covered-up belongings mounted on a wall (Basil 2021, 6:28). While referring to the German memory culture as admirable, Basil also suggests in the visual narrative that something is hidden, has been covered up, is not being seen clearly. Also reflecting as a British citizen, she tries to translate the concept to the British context. She begins to compare Germany’s memory culture with Britain’s, noting how in Britain, there was no compulsory school class or memorial acknowledging the crimes of British colonialism and the deaths and suffering of

its colonial subjects. Feeling that she has been “cheated” (2021, 7:45) or even betrayed, Basil explains how she has become more careful around public memory discourses, aware of their synthetic nature. She comments, “There had been no questions related to these latter events [German colonialism] in my citizenship test” (2021, 9:30-9:36). At the same time, images of scaffolding show construction of the Humboldt Forum and begin to blur again as the images are overlaid on one another. Basil shows not only the construction of the building, but also the constructed nature of national memory that focuses on the Holocaust and obfuscates German colonialism.

Particularly interesting is that the reflections in the film essay on the constructed-ness of national memory arise from the comparison of British and German memory cultures. The attentiveness to national memory culture that Basil first describes as emerging from her comparative experiences in Britain and in Germany then pushes her to look more critically at Germany. Here one can clearly see the “productive” nature of memory’s multidirectionality, i.e. where the “cross-referencing” between British and German ways of remembering creates a path to consider German colonial histories (Rothberg 2009, 3). Basil observes the incompleteness of Holocaust memorial culture, which often “forgets” the crimes committed against Sinti and Roma, queer, and disabled people (2021, 8:24-8:37). She also points out “forgotten” German colonial memories, such as the genocide of Herero and Nama peoples in Namibia between 1904 and 1908 as well as atrocities committed in Tanzania during the Maji Maji rebellion in 1905. Basil subverts the space of the museum by embedding images into the alternative museum space that document German colonialism (2021, 9:10-9:30) and European colonialism more generally (25:10-25:26), as well as footage of Black Lives Matter demonstrations (10:32-10:45; 26:52-26:58) and activists toppling statues of colonial figures (10:46-11:02), events which took place in 2020, the year that the Forum opened. She thereby intermingles colonial histories with narratives of resistance across time and space and, again, disrupts the temporality of the museum; while at the same time establishing transnational continuities which connect colonial atrocities committed outside of Europe in the past to decolonisation movements in European cities today. Basil intertwines narratives of resistance and agency into the same space as the hegemonic narration of the Humboldt Forum to create a multidirectional rendering of Germany’s present and past that stretches beyond its geographic and discursive borders.

In the end, Basil posits the Forum as a sort of citizenship test, challenging those in Berlin and more generally in Germany to deal with the massive provocation the museum poses. She formulates the question: “As a citizen faced with the Humboldt Forum what are your options?” and includes four possible answers: “Visit and enjoy, boycott, inner migration, ask questions, and more questions, keep asking even if it hurts” (Basil 2021, 27:22-27:45). Noting that, “I can step away from the Humboldt Forum, but not out of the world” (2021, 30:26-30:31), Basil once again highlights how the museum seemingly consumes the

discourse on German postcolonialism and stands for something larger than itself. Her film essay preserves the Forum as “perpetually under construction” (Basil 2021, 28:43-28:45), which underscores the ongoing nature of this contested discourse. In reading the Humboldt Forum as a central reference for current debates about colonial history and memory in Germany, I argue that Basil’s text demonstrates how the viewer is directly implicated in the negotiation of German national memory. In putting this impulse into the form of a citizenship test question, Basil references a certain responsibility that German citizens and non-citizens alike have to think through the ways in which they are implicated, and even to transfigure this, as Rothberg indicates (2019, 124). Indeed, Basil encourages the viewer to think through the ways in which we are differently implicated in the project of the Forum and in the colonial and fascist legacies of Germany. Her perspective as a dual citizen and her ample use of British history and memory culture in the film essay gesture toward the building of “differentiated solidarities across and beyond nation-states” (Rothberg 2019, 28). Her film essay exemplifies the productivity of a multidirectional approach for re-remembering German colonialism and processing the wide-ranging impact of these histories on contemporary Germany.

Conclusion

In practising memory in a transnational and multidirectional way, Basil challenges the selective and insistently national memory of the museum by inserting memories into the museum space as resources for recognising and thinking through the implications of postcolonial Germany. Reorienting an understanding of museum objects as belongings, questioning to whom histories of imperialism and colonialism belong and who is responsible for their remembering, Basil’s text creates space for a consideration of what it might mean to repair in a postcolonial context. On this note, historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe reflects, “The truth is that Europe took things from us that it will never be able to retribute. We will learn to live with this loss. Europe, for its part, will have to take responsibility for its acts, for that shady part of our shared history of which it has sought to relieve itself” (2021, 172). The potential interdependency between “restitute” and “relieve itself of” points to the importance of memory culture for precluding attempts to repair that also seek to forget. Mbembe goes on to say, “The risk is that if it fails to give an account of itself while restituting our objects, it will conclude that, with the restitution complete, our right to remind it of all the truth is removed. But for new ties to be woven, it must honor the truth” (2021, 172). Weaving new ties and honouring the debt of truth seem to be what Basil is doing in her film essay. She creates a contact zone where memories of colonialism haunt the images of the Humboldt Forum and places them into the scaffolding and facades so that they remain there permanently under (the) construction and must be seen and felt by those who experience the museum space – at least through this film essay.

And yet, while the text is unequivocal in its critique, the Humboldt Forum logo still flashes across the screen at minute 33:40, uneasily posing the question: Is Basil's film essay also part of the Humboldt Forum's curation of its supposed "decolonisation"?⁶ Maybe. Or rather, almost certainly. At the same time, it makes clear how decolonisation, reparation, and repair are dependent upon a change in memory culture, upon acts of remembering. In December 2022 on the occasion of a street renaming in the so-called African Quarter (Afrikanisches Viertel) in Berlin, author and activist Sharon Dodua Otoo stated in a poem written for the occasion: "on the days on which I am most optimistic / I know it happens anyway: remembering" (Otoo 2022, n.p., my translation).⁷ Acts of remembering, acts of revision, they are happening and will continue to happen in Germany and in the discursive space of German postcolonialism. While the Humboldt Forum itself may not serve as a place for the "reconstruction" (Rothberg 2009, 5) of Germany's culture of memory, Basil's film essay creates an alternative museum space where this might begin to happen. Within the alternative museum space, translation and negotiation across cultural and national boundaries and between the individual visitor and the national narrative rearrange collective memory. While the film essay does not tear the building down, it does make it impossible to see the Humboldt Forum without also seeing its layers of complicity, and therefore creates a discursive space for ongoing reconstruction and repair of collective memory.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for example, the current program "The Palace of the Republic is Present", which addresses the legacy of Palace of the Republic and its impact as part of the Humboldt Forum's history. Critiques of how the new museum building erases and devalues East German perspectives are mitigated through website content, guided tours, performances, and publications (Humboldt Forum (n.d.)b).
- ² See, for example, *Africa's Struggle for its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat* by Bénédicte Savoy (2022), in which she details how the contemporary debate on restitution of colonial loot existed and was deliberately extinguished in Europe over 40 years.

- ³ For more on activist resistance to the Humboldt Forum, see, for example, Ayasha Guerin's description and analysis of a performance by the group Black Art Action Berlin (BAAB) in the Humboldt Forum in October 2021 in the article "Matter and Memory".
- ⁴ This is a similar strategy to the one used by Matthias de Groof in his film *Palimpsest of the Africa Museum* (2019), in which footage of the museum's renovation is included alongside footage of discussions with an advisory council about the future of the museum and how it can best address its colonial legacy.
- ⁵ James Clifford has also applied the term "contact zone" to museums in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), considering the relationships between the museum as a collector and the individuals and communities from whom the objects originate.
- ⁶ It should be noted that Priya Basil has since commented on the Humboldt Forum in an article with Teresa Koloma Beck from September 2021, in which they critique the posters announcing the opening of the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art, both museums within the Humboldt Forum. They argue that the posters, which display a mosaic of ethnological objects to resemble a single object that Basil and Beck describe as a "hyper-native" ("Hyper-Eingeborener"), do not effectively interrogate the controversies of the museum and its holdings or treat the images of the pieces with the respect that they deserve (Basil and Beck 2021, n.p.). Basil has also spoken about her concerns regarding "institutions colonizing postcolonialism through rhetorical appropriation that doesn't translate into action" (Basil et al. 2022, 238) in an interview with Susanne Buckley-Zsittel and Teresa Koloma Beck.
- ⁷ Original: "an den tagen, an denen ich am optimistischsten bin, / weiß ich, es geschieht sowieso: das erinnern" (Otoo 2022, n.p.).

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