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Essays towards Dialogicity: Response to Abiral Kumar, Souradeep Roy, Sainico Ningthoujam, Michelle Stork and Rita Maricocchi

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Response to Abiral Kumar

Abiral Kumar begins his essay "The Formality of Form" on the ghazal as a contact zone with an anecdote narrated by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi related to Vali Dakani, who was an unwelcome presence in the Mughal capital, because his poems mingled the ghazal couplets with the vernacular of the Deccan region. The Deccan, far south of the Mughal empire's stronghold in the north of the subcontinent, was where one could find this trace of "Dakaniyat". And yet, one has to trace this inherent sense of animosity between the two camps, as Kumar does in his introduction, with perhaps another question: what is the "Dakaniyat" of the ghazal doing to the form? In extending the scope of this argument, I want to look at the manner in which the "frontier" of the formal contentions in the poetic form we call the ghazal has always carried with it a material trace of a longer history of frictions and conflict. This frontier, located firmly in time and space where such words could be used to understand difference, is an imperative for us to understand how a translation of the form follows its *rawaniyat*, its fluidity in the seepages of time and the culture that one inherits. The form, from the moment it begins to be a contact zone of poetics, is a rhizomatic entity whose virtuality is an open circuit of distribution – something that also informs the way that it has become a genre of other writings in this day and age.

In terms of historical traversals, the distance from the Deccan to the Mughal court is one that is fraught with conflict. As the historian Shireen Moosvi noted in her 1982 essay, "Starting from Akbar down to Aurangzeb all attempts for conquests in the Deccan could be seen to have been not a simple matter of choice of the individual emperor but practically a matter of compulsion" (1982, 366). Since the span of time between Akbar (who ascended the throne in 1556) and Aurangzeb is about a hundred years, such a struggle for the Deccan was not a matter to be seen lightly. By the time Vali Dakani (whose name denotes his origins in the Deccan plateau) arrives in the Mughal

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court in Delhi in the year 1700, the conquest of the south is complete: Aurangzeb seized the key cities of Bijapur and Golconda from the Marathas in the 1690s (Richards 1993, 225). And yet, the conflict in the south continued. Under Aurangzeb the military budget kept growing and infamously ate into the revenue of the empire with many unhappy noblemen feeling that their contribution to the revenue system was being used to fight a long futile war in the south (Moosvi 1982, 372).

I want to highlight this historical background to posit that in the midst of the creative disagreements where Vali Dakani would be seen with mistrust and suspicion in the Mughal court in Delhi, the political climate at his arrival in the capital of the Mughals is also one where he embodies the frontier; his name denoted his origins and his Dakaniyat poetics posed a challenge to the established order of literature and culture. And yet, as Kumar correctly points out, Vali Dakani's use of the ghazal became quite popular in the capital and since then, the ghazal in Urdu has remained one of the staple forms of the subcontinent.

How does one read this? The incommensurability of being able to see the factors that determine how a form becomes the norm and then forms the base for innovation is a rather difficult thing to measure within historical and formal markers. And yet, it is here where the fluidity of the form, the *rawaniyat*, that has made the ghazal one of the most receptive objects of literature is located. In entering the discourse of a different context, the literary object is necessarily an object that is in translation. Hence, when "Dakaniyat" enters the discourse of literature, there is a shift in the literary object and the innovation, to which it gives way, becomes an iteration of the Urdu ghazal. The difference here arises from a failure of being something that *could be* assimilated into a canon of literature that did not, before that point of time, have the ghazal in its midst. And this notion of failure – shared by Kumar's work – is the point that also makes all other rhizomatic distributions of the ghazal possible, as virtualities that could be possibilities across time and space.

Here, one has to read this mingling not as an inevitability in the ghazal's march of progress that begins in the Arabian Peninsula and finds its way to a North American publisher's hands in the 21st century. The point is rather to see how the literary object in translation as a contact zone remains something that continually enters and exits zones of contact, being accepted as authentic in one moment, and being changed in the next. The question of authenticity that Kumar raises here by asking "[w]hat are the parameters of the form of the ghazal, and what are the perils of ignoring its structure?" becomes paramount to our enquiry. After all, if one were to question the insertion of the author's *nom de plume* when the ghazal comes to Persia, that, too, would be a violation of the form that was born in the Arabian peninsula. What, then, is a violation that is perilous to identifying a ghazal as a ghazal? And what is innovation that can aid a more playful poet in transforming the form? The "frontierness" of the ghazal's form, it would seem, is the circuit within which

certain possibilities have to be *both* a violation *and* an innovation. Certainly, Kumar's readings of Aijaz Ahmad's translation project as "the first expression of the form as a contact zone in the American context" is firmly rooted in this point. The formal frontier, for Agha Shahid Ali, is where one has to enter the declaration of the "real" ghazal.

The "real" ghazal as a literary object is transformed in the dialogue when it enters the environment of the translatedness. After all, there is no doubt that a ghazal, called as such either by Adrienne Rich or by Agha Shahid Ali, would exist; therefore, its "reality" of existing cannot be doubted. However, the parameter of measuring it via the definition of the ghazal is where this literary object is entering the temporal moment of defining. This would not only tell us about the way the ghazal is transformed, but trace the manner in which the transformation is taking place. It would, in a nutshell, tell us where the frontiers of its form lie. In the words of Anisur Rahman that Kumar uses, the "blue ghazal", "bastard ghazal" or "breath ghazal" can only exist in that translated sphere of existence once the ghazal as the form of a poem is the material of transformation – a kind of traversal across frontiers that this form's historical changes records *in itself*, in its formal distinctions (2019, n.p.). From Ali's point of view, the discourse of the ghazal had to take into account the couplet form and without that mark of authenticity, it would be too far from "the real thing" (Ali 2000, 2). This is where the ghazal, now migrating westward from the subcontinent to the North American literary space becomes a site of contestation. I would argue, however, that it is only in understanding the anxiety of creating this "real" and authentic ghazal that one can see the material change in its context – in this case, from the subcontinent to a different commercial context. The American ghazal that Ali creates in his anthology *Ravishing DisUnities*, hence, tells us as much about the history of South Asian literary forms in the American literary market as Dakaniyat in the ghazal tells us about the historical moment when the Deccan kingdoms are incorporated into the Mughal empire in the 1700s.

The frontier is marked indelibly in the ghazal, and it is the fluidity of ghazal form that allows for this transformation to take place. The frontiers, real in the sense of the Deccan in the age of Vali Dakaniyat in the Mughal empire, or formal in the sense of the anglophone ghazal, perform the dual job of both determining the historical moment of forming the form and the moment of transformation. And it is only in taking both these things into account that the materiality of time and space emerges. The ghazal tells us something about the way that literature is rhizomatically inserted into a cultural distribution chain, and every virtuality of its iteration is at once a historical possibility and also a fluid moment of translatory transformation. The transformation at the level of form is not only a moment of anxiety but also inaugurates a new pathway for the form to exist. And each new pathway brings us to the frontier of a brand-new contact zone.

Response to Souradeep Roy

> A Brechtian maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.'
>
> -Walter Benjamin

Souradeep Roy's essay "Making Brecht UnBrechtian But Is that a Good Thing?" delves into one the most contested questions around adapting something on the stage or in literature: what is the nature of the translated piece and what is its relationship with the original? In literary translations, this brings to the fore questions about choices of words, turns of phrase, or the literal or figurative ways of bringing a text from a different time into conversation with the present as we know it. This idea of translation becomes more complicated when we are talking about a theatrical text composed in the 1940s, especially one that has to be adapted in a context like Calcutta in the 1970s. By going deep into the reception of the Nandikar theatre group's adaptation of *The Good Person of Szechwan* known as *Bhalomanush* in Bengali, Roy's essay makes for a reading that not only complements the understanding of the Brechtian drama as a translated piece in Calcutta. By telling us about the way that someone like Samik Bandyopadhyay or Utpal Dutt would read the play, it also takes us outside the theatre. The point that he drives across brings me to the core of this argument: that any theatrical piece, whether it is written by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay or Bertolt Brecht, enters a space where the cultural context of "combined and uneven development" has to be represented not only in the plot of the play itself, but also in the way that the play relates to the conditions of being produced itself. This is where I would extend Roy's argument and read the role of the translator as a producer of a cultural text. This is also to take up Roy's own theoretical framework via Walter Benjamin's idea of translatability, and – to appropriate Benjamin again – transpose it on the task of the translator as an act of producing and asking: what does that entail when we are talking about the alienated melodrama in the Calcutta context?

Adding to Roy's contextualisation, I find it useful to mention that *The Good Person of Szechwan* (original title: *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*) was almost titled *Die Ware Liebe* by Brecht (Willet 1977, 51). This is a pun based on the homonymic relationship between the German words *Ware* and *wahre* where the two words' equal pronunciation points to both *Die Ware Liebe* translating as the rather mundane "commodity of love" as well as *Die wahre Liebe* denoting the romanticized idea of "true love". The line of enquiry that one finds to be consistent with Brecht's theatre is this rigorous criticism of capitalism and the porous nature of history where the material relation between capital and lives is always one that would be perceivable even in the most intimate forms of representation. This is true for the characters of the Brecht play that forms the basis for Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay's translation, which is set in Calcutta. Here I want to highlight the way in which Roy's reading of the translation also mirrors

a moment in the development of postcolonial theatre highlighting the ethical nature in which such a translation can be seen: much like an author, the translator as a producer of quotable gestures creates a cognition of history for the audience that is rooted in the instance of viewing. As Jacques Ranciere notes, "According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes them [the spectator] conscious of the social situation that gives rise to it and desirous of acting in order to transform it." (2009, 12) In-between the act of translating and the act of viewing is where I would like to read the ethical imperative that such an act of translation makes apparent, mediated by Benjamin's readings and engagement with Brecht's work.

If the work of art must be "inserted into the context of living social relations", then the way in which *Bhalomanush* exists as a translation of Brecht, as Roy shows, is not only about adapting a Brecht play for the Indian, or rather the Calcutta stage, but also about inserting the Brechtian mode of engaging with the material. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was formed in the 1940s when India was still a colony of the British Empire, is a useful node to understand this. As an association that was largely leftist in its inspiration and ideology, the IPTA had prominently socialist leanings in its programming. For instance, for May Day in 1942, they staged a play written by millworker T. K. Salmarker titled *Dada* (*Brother*) (Waltz 1977, 32). And yet, by the time that we arrive in the 1970s when groups like Nandikar are producing this Brechtian play, the influence of the IPTA had declined in the mainstream. In the words of the famous actress Zohra Sehgal, who was a member of the IPTA,

> Gradually the impact of IPTA declined, perhaps because a number of its artists became popular in Indian films and were no longer inclined to slave away without monetary compensation. Or maybe quite a few of them felt the organization was influenced by the Communist Party of India and because they had different political convictions, decided to leave IPTA. Or possibly, because the country had gained freedom and the imperialists been expelled, there was no longer a rallying cause! (Sehgal 1997, 33).

This is the context relevant to framing this era of the theatre-going public; this is a public that *would* go to watch a "night show in the cinema" to perhaps watch more commercially viable stars, possibly former members of the IPTA, in films. This situation creates the need for, as Roy calls it, "alienated melodrama."

I would argue that the alienated drama that Roy is using in reading the act of translation is also doing something else for the public that is used to watching an "unalienated" form of this melodrama: it creates a form of double recognition in the quotable gesture of the theatre. On the one hand, for an "educated" public that includes someone like Utpal Dutt who would have the knowledge of a more "traditional" (if one can use that word) Brechtian alienation and, on the other hand, for the public that may not be aware of that effect. Here, to bring in Benjamin's reading of Brecht, if the educative nature of

epic theatre is to be achieved by creating quotable gestures, these gestures would be "translated into recognitions" even as those "specific recognitions of actors and audience may well be different from one another." (1988, 25) In the case of *Bhalomanush*, this is precisely where the act of translating Brecht has to be located. In understanding the social relations in which the audience and the production of this theatre is located, *both* someone like Utpal Dutt *and* the audience who may not know of Brecht will have to be accommodated with the same theatrical gesture. And this is where the onus of interpretation has to be one where the melodrama must be both alienated and yet rooted in the theatrical gesture as a relationality that exists between the work as it exists and the "production relations of its time" (Benjamin 1988, 25). The ethical imperative brings us to the core of the act of translating: in bringing the Brechtian stage to Calcutta, the stage itself is a contact zone that must shift its mode of existing from the more established European form to the way in which that "functional transformation" ("*Umfunktionierung*"), as Brecht himself would call it, has to exist (qtd. in Benjamin 1988, 93). The translator as a producer of text *and* context has to, then, represent the conditions in which that production exists as well. This is where the use of Sanskrit in the play makes it more effective for a Calcutta public than for the play to be set as a parable in China. The cognition of history where caste and class violence are so acute and transparent makes the use of different regional dialects a more productive tension for the audience than a story that is set in Chinese myth. The *rupantor* of Brecht into alienated melodrama, thence, transforms and creates a transparent form of the production process. This is not only true for the class politics, as Roy's text tells us, but also for the aspect of gender.

To conclude, even in the progressive leanings of a scene like Calcutta in the 1970s, where the uneven development of capital is so disparate in its manifestations, the translator of theatre as a producer is embedded in social relations where alienation as a Brechtian mode has to be represented as much as the historical moment. In creating a gesture where that alienation is embedded in melodrama, a translator like Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay should be read within the Benjaminian framework of the author/translator, as a producer of texts in the age of capital that demands the ethics of radical *Umfunktionierung*. This requires us to not go back to good old things, but dig deeper into the new bad ones, as the Brechtian maxim would dictate (Benjamin 1988, 121).

Response to Sainico Ningthoujam

What is the cost of renaming something or someone? Perhaps the answer lies in the way in which that renaming is carried out in the moment of change. The question of agency – who is doing the renaming and who is being renamed – is at the heart of the character Soaba in the short story of the same name by Temsula Ao. In her essay "The Banality of Violence: (Mis)Remembering the Past", Sainico Ningthoujam connects this to the necropolitics of northeastern India and the manner in which such questions are forever enmeshed in the

power dynamics of the postcolonial state. I want to highlight the violence of this renaming by reading critically both the literal renaming of the character as well as what his embodiment of this change denotes and prophecies for the Indian nation-state. If the renaming is a failure – the short story's character Soaba demands to be called *Supiba* by his boss and is denied that agency – then what is the result of such a failure of communication? By reading this into the way of translation, I want to highlight how the onus of being translated connects to the discourse and the labour that is contained therein.

The specificity of the geopolitical position of Nagaland as a border state of India notwithstanding, Ningthoujam tells us that the embodiment of this contact zone is contained in every *body* that inhabits that area. And yet, no contact zone exists without the power dynamics of an authority who can denote an area as existing in a state of exception, one that requires a special permit to enter. For instance, before entering Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram in the northeast of India, one requires the Inner Line Permit. The body entering these areas has to be translated bureaucratically into this space as an outsider who is only a temporary visitor. For the body that already exists in that area, however, the contact zone is extended: from the designation of the area to the body of someone like Soaba. In areas fraught with tense administrative measures that define the "insider" and the "outsider", violence exists in slow and unspectacular forms like bureaucracy and application forms that take a lifetime to be processed owing to the postcolonial democracy's coloniality in the form of red-tape. But it also exists in the spectacular form of visceral violence, i.e., violence that is informed by the results of the same slow and unspectacular bureaucracy that determines who gets to be the insider and in what measure that definition is valid. For Soaba, this is the kind of suspense that leads to a deadly "encounter" with power structures.

For someone like Soaba, this is the kind of violence that is entangled in both the personal and the public form of existence. In the context of Nagaland, this is perhaps also an embodiment of the failure of communicating in a postcolonial system of existence. If the labour of translation falls on someone like Soaba, who is misnamed (his actual name is Imtimoa, we are told in the short story) and misremembered, the failure of communication can have fatal consequences. This is the legacy of colonial violence that is inherited not only by the systems that incorporate areas as "Indian" territories or other forms of identity, but also structures the interpersonal relationships of the people who inhabit these areas. The body that exists in the contact zone has to be legible either as a body that concedes to the power dynamics and speaks that language of power – as in the case of the Boss and his wife – or becomes completely illegible in that space. This can also be seen as the failure of "translating" the self in both forms of existence in the contact zone: bureaucratic and personal. The question that we have to ask in order to propel the question of translation further is this: who is accountable for creating a translation of a person or an area that is equitable and non-exploitative? And who becomes legible in this

discourse as "well-translated"? In the course of the text, it would seem that both these questions are deeply rooted in the power of naming itself.

Being named and being accommodated in any discourse poses the problem of romanticising a past that never was, which becomes clear in Ningthoujam's critical reading of the short story. Temsula Ao, she tells us, imagines a homogeneity of the Naga Tribes that "risks erasing the turbulent history of ethnic conflict in the region" that existed prior to the intervention of the Indian state. The romanticised pastoral existence of the tribal cultures, as it does exist in the text, carries us over to the other form of renaming and remembering: a literal *re-membering* of the past. Such a remembering does not take into account that the term "outsiders", which is used to denote people from "Assam, Bengal, Nepal, or Bihar" in the short story, could just as well refer to a different tribe in another era and that such readings of indigeneity perform the "noble savage" trope, as Ningthoujam points out. The problem, of course, is that in the failure to imagine any other kind of past that can be "translated" − literally *carried over* − into the contemporary moment, even indigenous forms of community may run the risk of performing exclusions that rival that of a nation-state. So, how do we begin to name this problem? After all, in inheriting infrastructures of power, what a colonised people inherit is also the problem of not being able to name their own past. The past as an unnameable perennial "failure" that could not be translated into a present is also a temporal deferral, since the onus of creating meaning lies not in the present moment where the entanglement exists. It either starts existing in a pre-colonial past or a future where all traces of an external coloniser would be erased. In every "<Insert name of space> only for <insert name of community>" slogan that one encounters, even in the postcolonial spaces of non-belonging, the failure of translating pre-colonial notions of belonging gives way to violent and turbulent forms of asserting dominance. The material entity of a body that resides in such a space or an area, thus, is always between names and between naming(s). The power of abrogating that naming is never without violence or strife. The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in India, for instance, has ceased to exist as a state since The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act of 2019. It has been renamed and reorganised into the Union Territories called "Jammu and Kashmir" and "Ladakh". What this change of status entails and who benefits from such reorganising is far beyond the scope of critical comment on an essay about the northeast of India; and yet one cannot write of the ways in which the postcolonial nation-state officially "translates" and "interprets" bodies into entities in areas without keeping in mind how the most elementary forms of belonging are informed by it.

In the case of "Soaba", both the character and the text of the short story are always in the act of being translated into being read as texts that not only represent these contexts artistically but also politically. Neither the text nor Ningthoujam's critical reading of it allow for easy answers out of the anxiety of defining the self within such a space of a literal contact zone in the border area.

The anxiety of such a translation, the text would perhaps posit, is always that it is under negotiations. Being embroiled in disputes and conflicts about belonging and non-belonging, the postcolonial nation-state is positioned as inheritor of the power structures against which it fought. On the other hand, in consolidating a position against such a state, the texts that want to resist also do not transcend the binaries that it is fighting. Between the romanticised pastoral of a simple village life that (never) was and the dreams of freedom from an oppressive system, even the failure of being "read" is a double bind. The past and the future are both illegible. The character who embodies this present is *both* an inheritor *and* an ancestor. In both being read as disabled or as a symbol that embodies the "stunting of people's hopes and aspirations in Nagaland", Soaba is incapable of entering the discourse as an equal (Arora 2019, 12).

This short story and its metapoetics show that the violence of colonialism is never static since the inheritances of colonialism are multi-faceted and difficult to untangle. The translation of the contact zone into bureaucracy means that every entity has to be named, labelled, and controlled in a measure that is not outside the colonial violence of the past. In translating resistance, the narrative of the discourse, too, is a space where binaries are not without violence or unproblematic in their definitions of who belongs and who does not belong. Perhaps it is not a surprise, then, that the character Soaba does not survive his own narration. There is, however, neither autonomy nor anonymity for the character. Even in death, in being buried, he is clothed in the garb of the man who causes his death. If anything, the end of the text ensures that there is no erasure that is outside the attempt at being appropriated into discourse. The renaming of Soaba remains a re-membering that never was.

Response to Michelle Stork

In my response to Michelle Stork's paper in the present issue I want to follow up on the question of how *Mad Max: Fury Road* handles and potentially subverts stereotypes that play into the coding of characters as Indigenous. I am particularly interested in the potential productive effects of the considerable racial ambivalence that is introduced by Stork and which the film presents to the audience on the protagonists' journey out of what I conceive of as petro-patriarchy. To this end, my dialog with Stork's essay focuses more in-depth on the encounter with the Indigenous-coded Vuvalini, some of whom are played by *white* actors, as well as Max's subordinate role. Stork's original argument establishes that there is more to the roles the Indigenous-coded characters play than simply being killed off or serving as stereotyped, essentialized intermediaries who are expected to put *white* society (back) in touch with 'nature' in a totem transfer narrative (cf. Stork's use of Hunt 2018, 72ff). The remarks I would like to add to this argument pivot on an observation about narrative structure. To not put the car before the engine in the investigation of a future regime promoting environmental justice, gender justice, distributive justice, and political justice more generally, I believe it is imperative to reflect

on how exactly the journey ends at the Citadel of all places. Although it terminates where it started, the journey that unites the refugees-turned-revolutionaries Furiosa, the 'wives', Max, Nux, and the Vuvalini is not circular. The flight from the Citadel that symbolizes Immortan Joe's patriarchal regime works more like a rubber band that catapults the group back to where they started after reaching the point of maximum elongation.

This extreme point in the narrative arc coincides with the realization that the Green Place, i.e., the 'promised land' where the refugees under Furiosa's lead intend to *settle* alongside the women-led society of the Vuvalini, has been made "sour" and inhospitable by pollution. Already this first point of contact with the Vuvalini or Many Mothers coded as Indigenous brings to the fore ambiguity in representation. This I see as an important step in deconstructing stereotypes that limit the options for action made available to Indigenous-coded characters and the political alliances they may enter. Rather than finding the Vuvalini in a fertile 'promised land' where they could take refuge and *settle* as Furiosa repeatedly insinuates, the travellers encounter an outpost surrounded by desert. This setting complicates and puts into question the essentializing identification of Indigeneity with fertility of the soil, sustainability, and "stereotypical proximity to the land" that Stork problematizes. While the sudden appearance of the Vuvalini on their assortment of customized off-road capable motorcycles shows that the desert is anything but deserted, the extensive arid landscape void of flora and fauna (except for a bug that Nux devours) counteracts the expectations of green pastures previously articulated by Furiosa (76:23).

The frustration over her hope dissolving into thin air triggers a cliché moment of masculinist catharsis in which Furiosa slouches her shoulders, discards her prosthesis, and moves away from the group dragging her feet through the sand to eventually fall to her knees and emit a cry that amalgamates despair, agony, and fury (81:16). This frustration embodied in Furiosa's reaction is productive. Not necessarily for Furiosa herself − but I argue that it is productive for the audience who are observing the scene unfold from Max's point of view. This positioning is marked by a number of countershots of his reaction in close-up to Furiosa's crisis in long shots, which encourages viewer identification with Max as spectator. The frustration that is coded into Furiosa's behaviour to be decoded by the audience is productive because it points to the disconnect between the romanticized expectation of Indigenous people (articulated by Indigenous-coded Furiosa herself) and the realities in both the film world as well the 'real' world to which any resulting insights may be applied. As such, this cathartic moment subverts Indigeneity as a topos denoting a harmonious, pre-lapsarian space-time *wo die Welt noch in Ordnung ist* ("where the world is still in (perfect) working order"). This German idiom encapsulates what is wrong with the topos: it readily lends itself to stereotyping and racializing discourse that effectively denies Indigenous

peoples' co-evalness by falsely locating them in and confining them to a glorified past.

This default positioning as 'pre-modern' or 'remnants of the past' restricts the autonomy and paths of action seen as legitimately available to Indigenous communities within (post)colonial regimes. Topos and idiom may also be read as suggesting that Indigenous lands were somehow shielded from the larger threat of climate change and industrial pollution in the Anthropocene. Furiosa's crisis speaks of the continuing displacement of Indigenous people after the period of formal colonialism as well as their capability to adapt to the conditions of post-apocalyptic modernity, which illustrates that the assumptions connected to the topos do not hold. I therefore read the film as cutting short the romanticized search of a supposed 'promised land' in the hands of Indigenous people, i.e., the fiction of a 'paradise lost'.

Deconstructing this romanticized topos is crucial for any discussion of Indigeneity and environmental justice because it requires the protagonists and the viewer to question and reverse their thinking. This is to say that instead of following a colonial logic that keeps them going in hopes of leaving patriarchy and pollution behind to find another habitable speck of land, they must re-orient in favour of a logic of repair. The only viable option is for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to ally and take the fight to where environmental pollution, unequal access to resources and political injustice are emanating from – i.e., *white* settler society and the global industrial centres rather than unceded Indigenous peoples' land. In the logic of the film, the refugees fleeing patriarchy and environmental pollution are charged with the task of becoming revolutionaries, which fulfils the audience's moral demand for retribution. That they are a mixed bag of characters that are coded as Indigenous, *white* and in other more ambiguous ways may reinforce the romanticization of oppression because it places the political burden of revolution with those bearing the brunt of the injustice.

This comes to bear in the encounter with the Vuvalini that represents the maximum elongation of the narrative rubber band. It snaps back when Max's feelings of guilt and responsibility prompt him to seek out an alliance rather than continue as a lone wanderer (85:33). After the others have resolved to set out on a forlorn attempt to flee across the salt desert on the Vuvalini's motorbikes, he overtakes the group and suggests that rather than chasing the uncertainty of dreams and hopes, they should go back to where they *know* there is water and fertile soil for the Vuvalini's seeds – to the Citadel. It is important to mention here that Max does not perform a conventional masculinism by *deciding* the plan. Instead, he pursues a cooperative stratagem by making a suggestion that respects the female-led alliance already in place. His suggestion is then deliberated and agreed upon. Therefore, I read Furiosa, the 'wives', and the Vuvalini as retaining their auto-mobility in the sense of action *suo moto* – although Max is instrumental in changing the course, they remain in charge and their motivation as well as political destination stay the same. After the

alliance is agreed upon, everyone except for Valkyrie and Maadi trade in their individual mode of transportation on motorcycles for seats in the collectively occupied War Rig and also Max shows himself content riding shotgun instead of steering either the endeavour or the vehicle.

I agree with Stork's argument that sees the Vuvalini as implicated in petro-culture by way of their motorized means of transportation. The concomitant complication of their Indigenous coding may benefit from a discussion of the underlying tension between collectivism and individualism articulated within the framework of automobility. The Vuvalini are a highly mature group. What may sound like a euphemistic comment on their elder members is meant to capture their political condition as opposed to Kant's notion of *Unmündigkeit* or 'immaturity'. This is to say that within their own post-apocalyptic automobility-modernity, the Vuvalini shoulder political responsibility in a mode that seems to balance individual and collective. As an all-female band of itinerants, they enjoy a high degree of autonomy and do not share the refugees' fate of living heteronomous lives in a patriarchal society. In a stereotypical reading, the tribal coding of the "Many Mothers", which is re-affirmed by Furiosa's self-identification with "Clan Swaddle Dog", suggests collectivity as their default mode. This reductive assumption is complicated by the Vuvalini's potpourri of customized scrambler motorcycles that symbolizes a highly individualized mode of transportation and simultaneously cites masculinisms commonly associated with gearheads and the ruggedness signified by endurance motorbiking.

The intricacies of these different forms and aesthetics of automobility call for more in-depth analysis – not least because *Fury Road* appears to reserve the cultural object of the motorcycle primarily for those factions who have not found a place in the car-crazed *white* settlements of the Citadel, Gas Town or the Bullet Farm. Although there are motorcycles by these factions present in the chase back to the canyon, they have a purely decorative function. This difference in automobility culture becomes meaningful when considering the individual subjecthood coded into the use of motorcycles underlining the automobility-modernity of the Vuvalini in the sense that their society is based on wilful association of individuals. Contrary to, for example, the War Rig or the various assault vehicles that require a crew and a base to be operational, the Vuvalini's motorcycles suggest that it is within the power of each member to at any time dissociate herself from the group and go her own way. However, this does not happen, which speaks of a strong political group consensus that balances the demands of collective and individual. Oscillating between these extremes, the Vuvalini's complex auto-mobility confronts romanticized notions that blindly glorify Indigenous people as proto-communist communities without individual political subjecthood and thus falsely deny their co-evalness by relegating them to the realm of pre-modernity.

The change from one mode of automobility that is associated with individualism to the appropriated, reclaimed or occupied multi-seater War Rig

signals that the Vuvalini trade in part of their individual, auto-mobile autonomy for a greater, shared vision developed by this alliance of people who are differently located but share a sense of being imperilled. They all, including Valkyrie and Maadi who jointly take a single motorbike into battle, pledge their lives to ending each other's oppression and establishing another Green Place. The same is true for Max and Nux who are accommodated in the female-led alliance after they are separated from their cars that hitherto constituted part of their identity. Robbed of his automobile that supported him as lone wanderer by providing a hard shell and transportation, tormented Max suggests his plan for a revolutionary alliance in a soft tone and concludes with the words, "At least that way, you know, we might be able to . . . together . . . come across some kind or redemption." (88:38) The group is united in their shared sense of being imperilled by Immortan Joe and for what he stands. Although they have different reasons to feel this way, they share the same goal. Nux even sacrifices himself for this goal and blocks a crucial passage to cover the group's advance toward the Citadel (105:32).

The discourse surrounding Indigeneity is modified by gender in a peculiar way. The Vuvalini's outpost makes use of gendered genre expectations to unfold its potential as what could be described as the workings of a Venus fly trap. The refugees spot from afar an isolated transmission tower hung with mirror shards to attract the attention of passers-by (76:52). There, they encounter a naked woman who has supposedly fled to the top of the metal structure and shouts for help, which Max comments with the words "Uh, uh. That's bait." (77:41). At first glance, this setup seems to conform to and enable a heterosexual male gaze that fixates on an exposed female subject stripped not only of her clothes but also her agency. More precisely, I suggest that the trope of 'the damsel in distress' is deployed strategically to interpellate and elicit a response from anyone who approaches to interact with the putative victim.

The Vuvalini have adapted to their patriarchal surroundings and use the dominant scripts, hyper-masculinist expectations, and the heterosexual male gaze to their advantage. Just like the mirrors fastened to the transmission tower reflect light to attract attention, the reaction of passers-by to this literally generic situation mirrors their intentions. The Vuvalini may read their behaviour and judge their intentions before they reveal themselves. They effectively repurpose this narrative trope that has proven limiting to female characters in other contexts to enter the situation from a position of power. That Valkyrie – the woman atop the transmission tower – may be stripped of her clothes but not her agency becomes clear when her ululation summons the remaining Vuvalini on their motorcycles who seize control of the situation after Furiosa has identified herself. Meanwhile, she descends, puts on clothes and greets Furiosa cordially.

The ambiguity inherent in the Vuvalini's appropriation and inversion of the damsel trope is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, it draws attention to the ambiguous relationship of objectification and autonomy. Both

seem to go hand in hand in the attempt to arrest the heterosexual male gaze by means of self-objectification and then use it to the group's advantage. The inversion of the trope thus reaches into long histories of sexualized violence and exploitation directed against Indigenous people and Indigenous women in particular. The Vuvalini – evidently successfully – draw on and reclaim their sexuality to generate agency vis-à-vis the patriarchal paradigm to which they are subjected outside of their own society. On the other hand, their implementation of the damsel trope has a darker side. It implies that the Vuvalini are 'criminals' in the sense that they waylay people presumably as a means of subsistence and to safeguard their territory. As is the case with their sexual agency, this takes recourse to colonial stereotypes and trauma. Formally, it appears to affirm the widespread criminalization of Indigenous people by colonial governments who used this as a rhetorical strategy to justify discriminatory policies. Nevertheless, I argue that it does not blindly reproduce colonial ideology ascribing racial predisposition for criminal behaviour to Indigenous people. While the Keeper of the Seeds' initial reaction to Max's plan is an enthusiastic "Kaboom!", it soon becomes more nuanced. She eventually shows herself not particularly partial to violence but favouring the aforementioned logic of repair by saying, "I like this plan. We can start again. Just like the old days." (87:45-88:15) The Vuvalini do not shy away from using violence as a tool for self-defence but their enthusiasm for establishing a new Green Place as means of peaceable subsistence tells a story that is very different from the colonial stereotype. In fact, the Vuvalini get to clarify their predicament in the original Green Place in their own voices:

> The Soil.
> We had to get out.
> We had not water.
> The water was filth.
> It was poisoned. It was sour. (81:01)

This autodiegetic contextualization further subverts the stereotype. Firstly, it claims narrative authority for the Indigenous-coded group over those responsible for their situation. By telling their story themselves and making it known to the audience, they overcome the state of 'voiceless' subalternity to which they had previously been relegated. Secondly, they narrate how the ecological collapse of the Green Place, which resulted from the pollution created by other factions, forced them into their vagrant automobility and admittedly aggressive habitus. The 'criminality' cited by colonial regimes is ultimately self-referential: it refers back to these regimes themselves as the ones who put in place the material conditions for what they articulate as deviant and in need of reform. The film thus helps expose the racist ideology underlying colonial narratives of 'civilizational progress' and problematizes the romanticization of Indigeneity.

Fury Road remains romantic as far as the alliance's triumph is concerned. As the last scenes of the movie show, the patriarchal system stands and falls with the character of Immortan Joe. Once his dead body lying on the hood of Joe's own Gigahorse is revealed by Max, there is a general state of shock, which is overcome by three very young War Boys who react to the lumpen masses shouting in unison "Let them up!" The male children who have been socialized in the masculinist War Boy tradition encourage each other and loosen the brake under the eyes of the gigantic but perplexed lift guard to further lower the lift platform and give the returnees access to the fortress (111:15). They decide that those who have proven Immortan Joe to be just a regular Joe should be let up into the Citadel proper without a fight. This speaks of younger generations' readiness for substantial change, which means to actively embrace rather than only passively tolerate female leadership in the face of ecological catastrophe. While older (especially *white*) people outside of this fictional world may remain complacent about their consumption and pollution or even translate their frustrated conservatism into reactionary politics because they do not feel imperilled in the same way as they will not live to suffer through the repercussions of their actions, marginalized people and the younger generations are not afforded the same luxury of feeling at ease with the status quo in the Anthropocene. The literal opening of the flood gates to both emotional release and the Citadel's water supply by the 'breeders' who were previously dehumanized and reduced to the state of dairy cattle signals the transfer of power following this decisive shift in political consciousness.

When the lift starts moving up, Max quietly leaves the all-female group of returnees who have taken on board several of Immortan Joe's former subjects – among them a sizeable group of children (112:26). Merging with the crowd that has by now finished taking their erstwhile ruler's body apart in a gory hands-on act of deconstruction, Max nods his assent to Furiosa's ascent who returns the gesture of recognition. He is shown to relinquish any claim to power that may or may not arise out of the role he has played in the fall of Immortan Joe. As Stork argues, this presumably marks the end of autocratic patriarchy in the Citadel and the beginning of a politically as well as ecologically more sustainable future. Max's renunciation of power to the benefit of a regime that involves Indigenous-coded women is central here insofar as he mirrors and re-affirms the boys' gesture of renouncing power. Like Nux, who in true War Boy-style demands "Witness me!" before he sacrifices himself to block the pursuers' path (106:03), Max seems to be content with the recognition he receives from his ally Furiosa. The film's narrative implies that 'Mad Max' leaves to continue dealing with his demons on his own, but there is a larger moral that should find application beyond this fictional world. By riding shotgun during the journey on *Fury Road* and not claiming leadership of the alliance, Max formulates an alternative to the other *white*, presumably heterosexual masculinities portrayed by Immortan Joe, the People Eater and the Bullet Farmer whose unsustainable patriarchal fantasies seal their fate.

Response to Rita Maricocchi

There is plenty to criticise about the Humboldt Forum and its neocolonial gestures. However, one cannot deny that there is a peculiar sense of universality that attaches to the Humboldt Forum as a discursive formation. This is by no means an endorsement of its mode of operation, the norms it posits or the decidedly Eurocentric, *white* cultural and material legacy which the imperial gesture of re-constructing the *Stadtschloss* ('City Palace') façade evokes. It is much rather intended as a meta-comment on the Humboldt Forum's extraordinarily successful interpellation of both supporters and critics through which it has by and large managed to re-direct and absorb criticism into a discourse of its own shaping and on its own terms. As Maricocchi puts it in her contribution to this issue,

> 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. … 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.

The Humboldt Forum's discursive machine consumes its visitors and extracts from them validation and legitimacy. Its power seems to derive from a social media logic: any kind of interaction – no matter whether it supports or criticizes its agenda – provides the fuel on which the discursive system runs. How then to dismantle a machine that feeds on any kind of feedback? One logical approach would be to boycott the Forum to stifle the discourse around it and deprive it of the concomitant legitimizing effects. Within the context of the attention economy, its opponents have therefore interpreted visiting the Humboldt Forum as a form of collaboration and a betrayal of the decolonial cause. This exhortation to take a moral stance by not consuming and, in turn, being consumed by the Humboldt Forum, however, constitutes an epistemological impasse for academic inquiry because an effective critique requires a certain level of familiarity with its concrete articulations. Where does this leave the imagined community of postcolonially-minded activists and scholars trying to effect the decolonization of the Humboldt Forum? How to make it more meaningful than what Wan wo Layir diagnoses as "colonisation of decolonial and anti-colonial discourse" (2022, n.p.) and which re-privileges colonial structures of exploitation that decolonization means to overcome? If we want to commandeer the discourse in order to grab the helm and change course, we cannot very well sink it before the port of destination is reached.

The Humboldt Forum narrates itself as in a permanent state of crisis. While it does not exclude everyone invested in dismantling it from the discourse it engenders, it disprivileges their perspectives by positioning its own institutional performance of hegemonic *whiteness* and academic habitus with a

supposedly more universal and non-biased perspective in the centre of the attention economy. In this construction, the agents and their different politics that are invited to meet and discuss are implied to have merely subjective and particularized perspectives guided by self-interest while the Humboldt Forum feigns an aura of objectivity as the arena for the negotiation of decolonisation. It could be said to claim universality as a *space* rather than as an actor with motives.

In this context fraught with tension, Maricocchi discusses the contributions of Priya Basil, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as well as Wan wo Layir, who responded to the Humboldt Forum's invitation to criticize it. These examples give an inkling as to the paradoxical situation in which the Humboldt Forum legitimizes its own existence via the criticism it provokes – especially when it gets the chance to pay its critics to insinuate a spirit of cooperation and atonement. As a master of puppets of sorts, the Humboldt Forum literally buys into the criticism raised against it in order to appropriate it. On the one hand, this confirms Maricocchi's diagnosis of a pseudo-cathartic, masochistic process in which the Humboldt Forum asks stakeholders to criticize its practices and then incorporates these critiques by presenting them as part of the Forum's discursive fabric and its narrative of *Aufarbeitung* or genuine, transformative reckoning with the past. On this subject Wan wo Layir writes,

> will the master pay an artisan to destroy their own house? … The Humboldt Forum externalises the task of keeping colonialism alive to us, the colonised. It externalises and frees itself from examining its involvement in the colonial project and rather proposes to be the centre for examination. So for subalterns, other considerations beyond speaking – like food, shelter, and security – are tied to the very structures that shut them up. In fact, the subaltern cannot speak because the subaltern is eating. (2022, n.p.)

This strategy works toward self-immunization against any radical critiques by appropriating the dialectical process regarding the Humboldt Forum's own abolition. It confuses the discursive political process for its end result – material change – and therefore legitimizes the conservative notion that the journey is the destination. On the other hand, this strategy generates a peculiar sense of universality by insinuating it was representing the whole of the discourse that surrounds the Humboldt Forum within itself, which reproduces an imperial logic according to which the truly relevant parts of what is considered the periphery are already contained in the centre. It also plays to universality in the sense that it pretends to contain its own antithesis and that its autonomous, self-authored dialectics puts it into a state of permanent revolution that is practically beyond criticism. By pointing to the Forum's historical and continuing implication in colonial structures, Maricocchi reduces this supposed universality and objectivity to absurdity.

Maricocchi mentions that one of the Humboldt Forum's layers of meaning derives from its placement in the erstwhile location of the *Palast der*

Republik ('Palace of the Republic'), which served as both the East German parliament and as an event venue. The Palace of the Republic, mockingly referred to as *Erichs Lampenladen* (the GDR's head of state Erich Honecker's 'lamp shop') because of its aesthetics and more than generous lighting concept, represents a symbol in the Cold War's competition of political systems between East and West. Its demolition nearly two decades after the rule of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany had ended, was a humiliating gesture of superiority on the part of the West German 'winners' of said competition vis-à-vis the East German 'losers'.

As such, the act of demolition symbolizes persisting hierarchies of power, legitimacy and respect within East-West German relations that are fraught with the charge that the privatisation of the GDR's state-owned industries has been turned into a sale (*Ausverkauf*) for the enrichment of West German businessmen during the *Abwicklung* ('liquidation', literally 'unraveling') of the East German state in the 1990s. The "dominance of West German elites in Eastern Germany" is increasingly framed as "cultural colonialism" (Richter 2017, n.p., my tr.) tapping a postcolonial vocabulary and continues to extend into different spheres of public life. Science journalist Jan-Martin Wiarda, for example, reported that according to a study published in May 2023 a mere 15 out of 163 surveyed universities in Germany were led by East Germans (Wiarda 2023, n.p.). This is not to re-centre *white* subjects as exclusive referents of moral concern or create a situation of victimhood competition between differently racialized groups. I rather suggest that there is also a case to be made for decolonisation of German (memory) politics that cannot remain a metaphor with respect to East-West German memory politics.

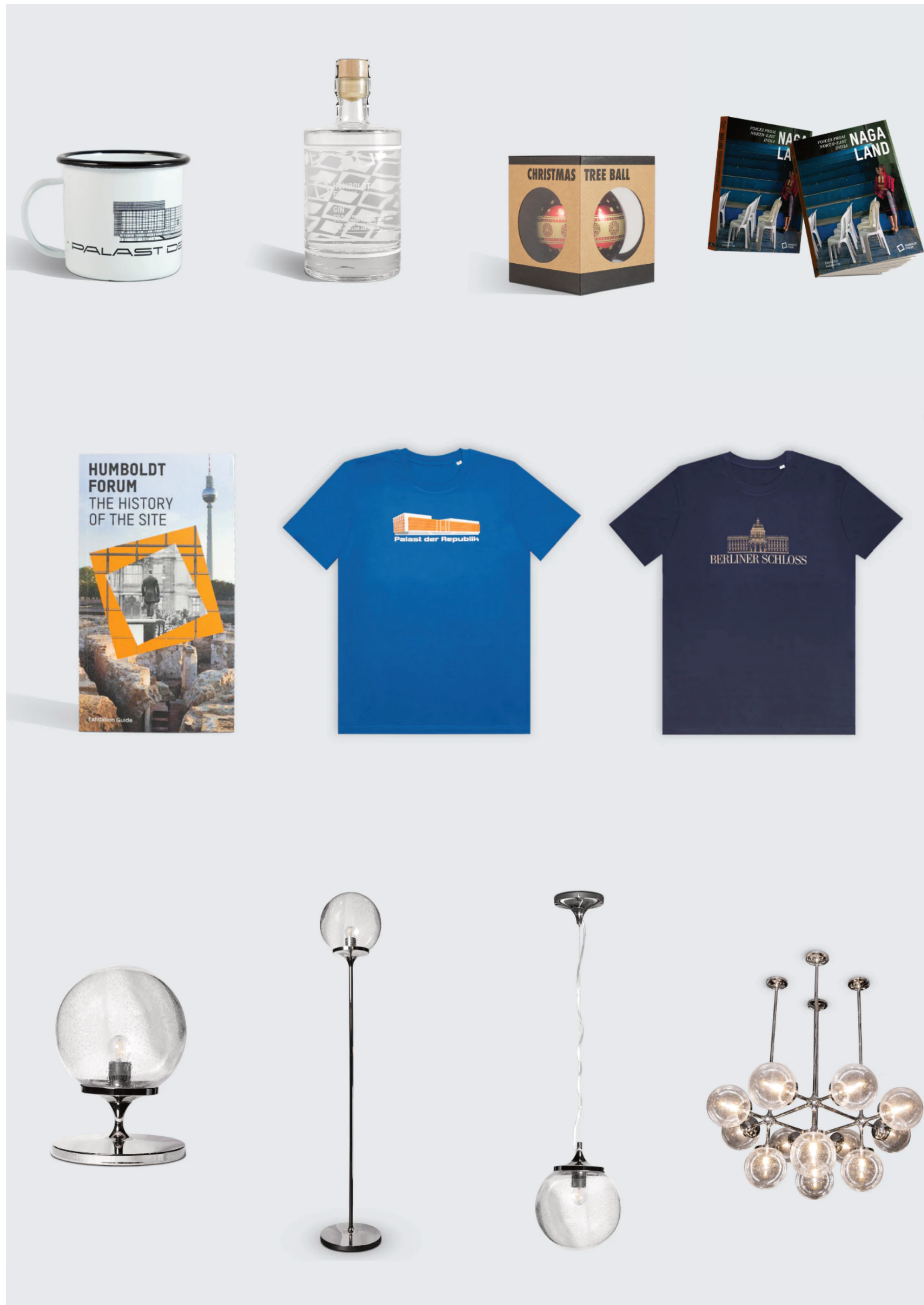

Figure 1: Collage of items assembled from the Humboldt Forum's online shop

I would therefore like to add an East-West German perspective to the arguments raised in relation to the Humboldt Forum by using a formation of unfamiliar objects in the form of the uncomfortable eclecticism practiced by its gift shop to translate this divide into dialog. The product range is a wild fantasy

world of corporate-branded items as varied as stationery, gin, vodka, Humboldt-themed seed balls, masking tape and books. It also comprises memorabilia such as Christmas tree decorations, literature and clothing featuring the three architectural and ideological iterations of the space – City Palace, Palace of the Republic and Humboldt Forum (see figure 1). The Humboldt Forum's gift shop thus symbolically reproduces the *Alleinvertretungsanspruch* or claim to sole representation formulated by the Federal Republic of Germany, which holds itself to be the only legitimate German state and 'winner' of the competition of political systems. I take this as pretending to a peculiar universality in the sense of being able to self-represent its various pasts in the forms of the City Palace and the Palace of the Republic, its purportedly democratic present iteration as a 'forum' as well as its future by presiding over the permanent revolution engendered by its continuous discursive de- / re-construction.

The gift shop's hybris extends beyond the commodification of decolonisation outside of Germany as described by Wan wo Layir by extending its attempt at monetisation to include East-West German history. Its sales proposition explicitly capitalizes on the material aesthetics associated with the demolished Palace of the Republic by advertising a range of replicas in the style of the lamps that made it colloquially known as *Erich's Lampenladen*. Prices for the table lamp, floor lamp and pendant lamp range from 349.95€ to 389.95€. The largest piece in the set, however, comes in at a cost of 3,895€ (Humboldt Forum). In light of the structural and monetary disadvantages German reunification brought about for many East Germans in the form of unemployment and reduction in pension entitlements, I suggest that this cannibalisation of Germany's socialist legacy adds insult to injury. In a winner's gesture vis-à-vis the Other Germany, these socialist symbols are deliberately subjected to the capitalist logic of profit maximisation to generate funds for the Humboldt Forum Foundation's work. They are put beyond reach for most East Germans (as well as West Germans), which inverts their meaning from a symbol of joint achievement of the many to an individual status symbol of the few. This effectively puts the GDR on sale a second time as a means for individuals to transform their economic capital into social distinction and legitimizes the colonial logic of appropriation and commodification as the victor's prerogative. Despite advertising a vision of decolonial enlightenment, its exploitative politics thus condemn the Humboldt Forum to an existence as a *Lampenladen*.

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