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Revisiting the Archive: Counter-Memories and Decolonial Resistance in the Artistic Works of Grada Kilomba and Hew Locke

Revisitando o Arquivo: Contra-memórias e Resistência Decolonial nas Obras Artísticas de Grada Kilomba e Hew Locke

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Grada Kilomba's *The Boat* (2021) and Hew Locke's *What Have We Here?* (2024), articulating how these works engage cultural memory, decolonial praxis, and postcolonial activism within decolonial museum contexts. Grounded in Françoise Vergès's theory of *decolonizing the museum*, this analysis explores how both artists activate counter-memory, challenge colonial narratives, and create postcolonial sites of resistance, reconfiguring aesthetic experience into emancipatory practice.

Bearing in mind Françoise Vergès' ideas on decolonising the museum by disordering, decentering and dispersing it, this article proposes a dialogic reading of two contemporary afro-descendant artists whose artistic creations put into question official narratives and how they perpetuate multiple forms of silence and epistemic violence. The works of Grada Kilomba and Hew Locke to be analysed here interrogate the power relations that are established when representing cultures and peoples. From what is said to what has been silenced, these works are a necessary reminder that there are a multitude of voices that must be included in national conversations. Therefore, these works focus on how to reckon with colonial / imperial pasts. Both artists provocatively examine the stories that nations tell themselves about their own histories both politically and symbolically. Thus, by establishing a dialogue between Grada Kilomba and Hew Locke, it is my goal to examine the way these two contemporary artists contribute to the decolonisation of the museum through the questioning of official narratives and by performatively re-writing them in a space that has been previously configured to validate certain ideologies.

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KEYWORDS: Decoloniality, slavery, art, culture, activism, cultural memory, postmemory.

RESUMO: Este artigo examina *The Boat* (2021) de Grada Kilomba e *What Have We Here?* (2024) de Hew Locke, articulando como essas obras combinam a memória cultural, a práxis decolonial e o ativismo pós-colonial em contextos museológicos decoloniais. Ancorada na teoria de Françoise Vergès sobre a descolonização do museu, esta análise investiga de que modo ambos os artistas participam na construção de uma possível contra-memória, desafiam narrativas coloniais e criam espaços pós-coloniais de resistência, reconfigurando a experiência estética em práticas emancipatórias. Tendo em conta as ideias de Françoise Vergès sobre a descolonização do museu por meio da sua desordem, descentralização e dispersão, este artigo propõe uma leitura dialógica destes dois artistas afrodescendentes contemporâneos cujas criações artísticas colocam em questão as narrativas oficiais e a forma como estas perpetuam múltiplas formas de silenciamento e violência epistémica. As obras de Grada Kilomba e Hew Locke, aqui analisadas, interrogam as relações de poder que se estabelecem na representação de culturas e povos. Do que é dito ao que foi silenciado, essas obras constituem uma lembrança necessária de que há uma multiplicidade de vozes que precisam ser incluídas nas conversas nacionais. Assim, estas obras de arte concentram-se em como lidar criticamente com passados coloniais/imperiais. Ambos os artistas examinam de forma provocativa as histórias que as nações contam a si mesmas sobre seus próprios passados, tanto no plano político quanto simbólico. Desse modo, ao estabelecer um diálogo entre Grada Kilomba e Hew Locke, este artigo tem como objetivo examinar a maneira pela qual esses dois artistas contemporâneos contribuem para a descolonização do museu, questionando narrativas oficiais e reescrevendo-as performativamente em espaços previamente configurados para validar determinadas ideologias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Decolonialidade, escravidão, arte, cultura, ativismo, memória cultural, pós-memória.

Introduction

> But anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies. (Audre Lorde, 1981)

The world changed its social, economic, and cultural configurations the moment European navigators and explorers endeavoured multiple maritime crossings. The so-called new order shaped the world until today not only in cartographic ways but also in terms of identity constructions and social and cultural ones. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft *et al.* are clear about the extent to which the world's configuration shifted and how the world remains colonised until contemporary times. It is exactly the extent of that coloniality that remains part of the creative agenda of Afro-descendant artists when, for example, recovering slavery narratives and generating powerful decolonial discourses through their art. While artistic production works as a decolonial tool, it also becomes a powerful tool to strengthen discourses about memory and belonging. Therefore, I examine Grada Kilomba's *The Boat* (2021)[2] in conjunction with Hew Locke's *What Have We Here?* (2024)[3] in the attempt of creating a dialogic reading of a (post)imperial world that simultaneously obfuscates the lingering effects of racism and presents itself as globalised and egalitarian.

In times of extreme violence against humans and non-humans, in times of massive precarity and vulnerability experienced by masses all across the globe, the *crescendo* of right wing and extremist policies that affect millions of citizens, it may seem accurate to point out that art becomes the ground where insurrection seems to be possible by creating counter discourses that aim at reclaiming and de-silencing imperial and colonial narratives that have dominated the public arena in the past centuries. In the vein of that, the works of Grada Kilomba and Hew Locke are fundamental to unpack the violence experienced by black people during centuries of slavery, and consequently systemic racism. This is the violence that relegated black individuals to an infra-category of human existence whose bodies were dehumanised, and ultimately disposable as if they did not matter. Subsequently, the conjunction of art and activism serves a major purpose in transforming pre-established narratives into far wider representations of those same official discourses that still perpetuate certain idyllic constructions of glorious past events.

In recent decades, postcolonial and cultural studies have called for a radical reorientation of how museums represent histories marked by colonialism and slavery. Françoise Vergès describes

[2] Grada Kilomba is a Portuguese and West African (São Tomé e Princípe and Angola) descent artist and writer. Her interdisciplinary works critically examine memory, trauma, gender, racism and postcolonialism. She uses an array of formats to express herself ranging from text to scenic reading and performance. For images related with the performance selected here, the MAAT website can be consulted: https://www.maat.pt/pt/exhibition/grada-kilomba-o-barcothe-boat.

[3] Hew Locke is a British sculptor and contemporary visual artist. He grew up in Guyana where his father is from but studied and lived in UK most of his adult life. He received multiple awards, and his works became groundbreaking in questioning the empire and its multiple meanings and constructions. To see images of the above mentioned exhibition, the British Museum website can be consulted: https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/hew-locke-what-have-we-here

decolonizing the museum as a process of dismantling colonial epistemologies and rearticulating institutional narratives through marginalised voices. This article examines two artistic interventions – Grada Kilomba's *The Boat* and Hew Locke's *What Have We Here?* – as exemplars of this decolonial turn in art. Through these works, their authors explore the interwoven threads of cultural memory, activism, and the construction of postcolonial sites of resistance. Therefore, it is also possible to create a dialogic reading between those artistic creations and the theorization developed by Françoise Vergès related with the decolonisation of the museum.

Françoise Vergès (2023) articulates *decolonizing the museum* as a dual project: firstly, epistemic, challenging the museum's foundational reliance on colonial hierarchies of knowledge, and, secondly, transformative, actively re-centering formerly rendered-silent voices within institutional spaces. Museums must become spaces of *counter-narration*, thus contexts where colonial amnesia is interrupted by the claims of historical memory and where the visually compelling becomes politically potent. Central to Vergès's proposition is the notion of *counter-archives*, the recognition of cultural memory outside dominant canons, and the activation of museum spaces as arenas of decolonial struggle. These ideas offer a critical lens through which to read the visual and performative strategies used in Kilomba and Locke works.

Drawing on Achille Mbembe's reflections (2002 & 2015) on the archive and the afterlives of empire, the museum may further be read as a site in which colonial temporalities are stabilised and curated, fixing colonised cultures within an inert past. In response, decolonial curatorial practices seek to disrupt this necro-aesthetic ordering by reactivating objects as participants in ongoing histories rather than as static remnants. Mbembe points out that "the archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'" (2002, p.20). However, it can be argued that through strategies such as counter-archiving, recontextualization, performative intervention, and the centering of descendant community knowledge, these practices challenge the museum's authority over the temporal and sensory conditions under which heritage is made visible.

Colonial legacies are deeply embedded in the very fabric of public spaces, which are now increasingly revealed as arenas of critical reckoning. Long obscured by the subtle naturalisation of power, these sites have emerged as locations where questions of historical accountability intersect with demands for visibility, exposing the violence of epistemic erasure. They function as terrains of both memory and forgetting, where the remnants of empire persist require a confrontation with the enduring spectres of oppression and silence that continue to shape the present. The idea of decoloniality of knowledge, spaces, minds and bodies goes hand in hand with the possibility of producing counter-

archives (Mbembe) in which postmemory functions as the fuel to create situated knowledges through which Eurocentric worldviews are challenged. In the vein of that, it is my understanding that if, on the one hand, postmemory as theorised by Marianne Hirsch (2012) describes how descendants of those experienced trauma inherit and reimagine those memories, on the other hand, counter-memory in Foucauldian terms assumes here a more practical and dynamic approach that can be perceived as an act of resistance that relentlessly questions the veracity of "history as true knowledge" (Foucault, 1977, p.160). Both artists, Kilomba and Locke, create spaces where counter-memory disrupts national myths and exposes colonial amnesia. This is closely linked to epistemic disobedience, a key decolonial strategy identified by Walter Mignolo (2009), which involves rejecting dominant modes of knowledge production and legitimising subaltern perspectives. Together, these concepts form an interconnected praxis. Decoloniality provides the political and ethical imperative; epistemic disobedience enacts the break; postmemory supplies affective continuity; counter-memory challenges hegemonic narratives; and the counter-archive institutionalises these interventions. In dialogue, they enable a profound reconfiguration of how histories are told, remembered, and contested, particularly within cultural spaces such as museums.

In sum, what seems to be interesting here is this link between authors and their positionality in producing and de-centring knowledge that articulates a decolonial semantics whose construction is relevant / necessary to reimagine democratic, fair, and non-imperial societies. It is, then, relevant to critically examine the creative practices of artists whose work intervenes in the production of a more inclusive social order, particularly insofar as such practices challenge dominant regimes of knowledge by recuperating historically silenced narratives and reinscribing them within institutional spaces that function as key sites in the articulation, regulation, and legitimation of official discourse (Foucault, 1980).

1. Grada Kilomba: 'A Garden of Memories'

The era we are living in is characterised by intensified struggles over the public memory of slavery and its enduring afterlives. Since the late twentieth century, the history of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade have increasingly been reframed not only as a subject of historical inquiry but also as a central site of memory, shaped by power, silence, and contestation. Beginning in the 1990s, commemorative practices – including the proliferation of monuments and memorials across the Americas, Africa, and Europe – have functioned as material interventions in the politics of remembrance, making visible histories of racial violence long marginalised within dominant narratives (Araújo, 2024). Accordingly, Ana Lucia Araujo emphasizes on the importance of resistance and how enslaved people had long resisted and how that resistance has been disregarded and silenced in

contemporary exhibitions and museums. Hence, she points out that "museums address resistance as synonym for rebellion by neglecting the multiple forms of resistance employed by enslaved people […] instead of addressing resistance in their various displays, most exhibitions confine resistance to a separate section, as if bondspeople defied their slave status only on exceptional occasions" (2021:65).

Against the backdrop of ongoing racialised state and extrajudicial violence and the emergence of Black Lives Matter as a global movement in 2013, visual culture has assumed a heightened role in mediating the past. Film and television, in particular, have increasingly turned to the representation of enslaved historical figures, mobilising biography and spectacle to negotiate questions of racial subjectivity, historical trauma, and the limits of representational justice (Araújo, 2024). Although, as Ana Lucia Araujo explains when referring to the vast cinematic production on the theme of slavery, "despite focusing on the history of slavery, however, these films emphasized the role of white saviors, thereby neglecting the many ways enslaved people fought for their *own* freedom" (14:2024). Much is still left untold / silenced when addressing the history of slavery whose narrative is often presented through the lens of European and American protagonists. It is, then, fundamental to undertake a critical examination of the creative practices of artists whose work is oriented toward the production of a more inclusive social order, particularly insofar as these practices recuperate historically marginalised or silenced narratives and inscribe them within institutional spaces that actively participate in the construction, legitimation, and circulation of official memory and dominant discourses. Drawing from this the performative work of Grada Kilomba surges as a decolonial practice when reconfiguring the public space and (re)locating black subjects at the centre of a long silenced official narrative about the Portuguese empire and its legacies.

In 2021 Grada Kilomba created a performance-installation titled *The Boat,* its composition is made of 140 wooden tiles with engraved poems on them. The tiles together form the silhouette of the bottom of a ship and accurately design the space created to accommodate the bodies of millions of Africans enslaved by and trafficked across European empires. These blocks function simultaneously as sculptural elements, symbolic graves, and textual surfaces, many inscribed with poems in multiple languages, including African languages such as Yoruba and Kimbundu alongside Portuguese, English, Arabic, and Creole. The materiality of the burnt wood evokes destruction, burning, and loss, while the spatial configuration compels viewers to move slowly through the work, engaging in acts of reading, bowing, and bodily negotiation. In this way, *The Boat* transforms the exhibition space into what Kilomba conceptualises as a "garden of memory," a site where remembrance is neither abstract nor distant but enacted through embodied encounter (Kilomba, 2021)[4]. The work resists the museological

[4] The full interview can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRBhjl6goDM

tendency toward detached contemplation, instead demanding a physical and ethical proximity to histories that have been relegated to the margins of European consciousness.

The performance was first exhibited in Lisbon in an iconic location along the Tagus River, the MAAT in Praça do Carvão, during the *BoCA.* Along the 32 meters of the Tagus River, the installation meticulously creates that "garden of memories" whose main theme recovers by the act of de-silencing one of the longest and the most horrendous chapters of humanity. Through this hybrid form, Kilomba challenges dominant historical narratives that frame maritime history through discovery and progress, instead foregrounding the violence, erasure, and dispossession that underpinned European modernity. *The Boat* transcends traditional boundaries between sculpture, installation, performance, and ritual. It is at once a memorial, a collective lament, and a critical act of decolonisation urging audiences to engage with the traumas and (hi)stories that have been historically marginalised.

Grada Kilomba's integration of poetry, movement, music, and communal voices creates an immersive experience that not only recalls past horrors but also invites reflection on contemporary legacies of racial violence and resilience. Rather than reconstructing the slave ship as an object of spectacle, Kilomba offers a spatial outline that gestures toward what Saidiya Hartman has described as the "afterlife of slavery," namely the persistence of slavery's social and racial logics beyond its formal abolition (Hartman, 2007). Eloquently, Saidiya Hartman elaborates on the insidious and lingering effects of slavery by pointing out that,

I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance. Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery (2007, p.6).

The charred blocks, many inscribed with poems in multiple languages signal both the urgency of telling these histories and the ethical limits of representation, resonating with Hartman's critique of archival violence and her insistence on acknowledging loss, silence, and the irreparable gaps produced by racial domination (Hartman, 2008). Rather than a mere form of accounting, the embodied and lively archive produced by Kilomba amplifies "the instability and discrepancy of the archive, flouted the realist illusion customary in the writing of history, and produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical" (Hartman, 2008, p.13).

Central to Kilomba's practice is also the transformation of memory from a textual or archival object into an embodied and performative process. Thus, drawing on what Diana Taylor defines as the "repertoire" by explaining that "the mental frameworks – which include images, stories, and behaviors – constitute a specific archive and repertoire" (2003, p.86). *The Boat* partakes on that definition as it privileges embodied practices – movement, sound, voice, and ceremony – as modes of historical transmission (Taylor, 2003). The performance activates the installation through processional walking, choreographed gestures of mourning, collective breathing, and vocalisation, often performed by Afro-descendant participants whose bodies operate as carriers of historical knowledge. Memory here is not stabilised or fixed; it is enacted, repeated, and relational. Kilomba, thus, challenges Western epistemologies that privilege written documentation while marginalising embodied, oral, and ritual forms of knowing which are historically central to diasporic survival and resistance. And ultimately, Kilomba reinforces the idea that "cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection" (Taylor, 2003, p.82).

Subsequently, Kilomba explicitly frames the performance as a ceremony, emphasizing the capacity of the ritual to reconstruct the past not as a closed narrative but as an ongoing ethical encounter. This ceremonial dimension resonates with Achille Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics, particularly his account of colonial regimes as systems in which power is exercised through the management of death and the systematic exposure of certain populations to disposability (Mbembe, 2002). The slave ship, as evoked in *The Boat*, appears as an early and paradigmatic site of necropolitical power, where enslaved Africans were rendered cargo and death was rendered administratively invisible. Yet the work does not simply restage this violence. Henceforth, through collective voice, music, and embodied presence that was developed in collaboration with Kalaf Epalang, the performance insists on forms of communal life that exceed the colonial logic of death, asserting presence where erasure once operated.

Bearing in mind Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory used to describe "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (2012, p.5), Kilomba's performance may be comprehended as an "imaginative investment, projection, and creation", and "a platform of activist and interventionist cultural and political engagement, a form of repair and redress" (Hirsch, 2012, p.6), through which the visitors are invited to confront both past and present, confront silences and the normalisation of racism. In this self-reflexive performance Kilomba symbolically reminds the spectators of European history insofar as it becomes a lively testament that both honours the lost lives of enslaved people and calls for action. Within these parameters, Grada Kilomba's "intersectional work responds to the contemporary urgency

for decolonization in general, and knowledge and imagination in particular" (Beleza Barreiros & Katar Moreira, 2020, p.58). That is, as proposed by Franz Fanon, a societal decolonisation where the lingering effects of systemic colonialism are exposed by means of revisiting and questioning entire systems that had (have) meticulously located certain people, certain bodies, outside of human condition.

Nonetheless, *The Boat* resists closure, reconciliation, or redemptive narratives of healing. It does not propose historical repair as resolution, nor does it offer a complete account of the past. Instead, it stages an ongoing confrontation with unresolved structural, political, and affective trauma. By combining installation and performance, text and sound, individual contemplation and collective ritual, Kilomba articulates a decolonial aesthetic that disrupts linear historiography and Eurocentric regimes of knowledge. Through this work, Grada Kilomba insists that history is not confined to the past nor to institutional archives, but continues to inhabit bodies, languages, and spaces in the present. In this sense, *The Boat* functions simultaneously as a memorial, a performative archive, and an act of resistance, demanding that cultural institutions and their publics reckon with the enduring legacies of colonial violence and the responsibilities of remembrance.

2. Hew Locke: Tides of Memory, Acts of Defiance

Founded in 1753, the British Museum is frequently positioned within historiographical narratives as one of the earliest national, public, and secular museums, emblematic of Enlightenment ideals of universal knowledge and civic access. Within the United Kingdom, it has long functioned as a central authority in the collection, classification, and display of classical antiquities, contributing to the construction of canonical understandings of the ancient world (Combes, 1994). However, from the perspective of museum studies and postcolonial scholarship, the institution's collection practices are increasingly interrogated as products of imperial expansion and asymmetrical power relations. The provenance of numerous artifacts – often acquired under conditions shaped by colonial domination – has rendered the museum a central site of contestation. Consequently, demands for the repatriation of culturally significant objects have emerged as a sustained challenge to the museum's claims of universal stewardship, accentuating broader debates concerning cultural ownership, epistemic authority, and the decolonisation of heritage institutions (Duthie, 2011). As Moira Simpson writes, the museum is "a mirror reflecting the views and attitudes of dominant cultures, and the material evidence of the colonial achievements of the European cultures in which museums are rooted" (Simpson, 1996, p.1).

From the standpoint of decolonial aesthetics and curatorial activism, however, the museum is more productively understood as a contested site in which dominant regimes of perception, value, and

historical narration are both produced and challenged. Subsequently, as Walter Mignolo (2013) argues, modern Western aesthetics functions as a regulatory framework that governs *aesthesis* – conditions of sensory experience – by naturalising Eurocentric ways of seeing and interpreting material culture while delegitimising alternative, non-Western modes of perception and meaning-making.

Within this critical framework, the British Museum's curatorial conventions – its reliance on formalist display, classificatory taxonomies, and linear temporal narratives – operate as extensions of what Aníbal Quijano (2000) theorises as the coloniality of power. These practices reconfigure objects extracted from colonised or formerly colonised regions into legible artifacts of universal history, severing them from their living social, ritual, and political contexts. Decolonial artists and curators have increasingly intervened in these regimes of display by exposing the museum as an epistemic technology that aestheticizes colonial extraction and renders imperial violence invisible through neutralising modes of presentation. In lieu of that, Françoise Vèrges states that the museum should be seen as "a battleground", and based on that "it is not a neutral site of planetary humanism, but a social space in which social, cultural, and economic conflicts play out, and in which private foundations set up by multinationals play an increasing role" (2023, p.44).

It is, precisely, in this scenario of a colonial / imperial space that in 2024 Hew Locke presented its exhibition titled *What Have We Here?*. Located in one of the many rooms of the British Museum, the artist selected an array of artifacts to construct what can be seen as a counter-narrative that aims at rendering colonial and imperial violence visible by reconfiguring the artifacts that had long been used to glorify the past. Through the strategic juxtaposition of historical artefacts from the British Museum's collection with his own contemporary artworks, Locke constructs a layered meditation on British imperial history, the circulation of objects, and the politics of display.

Rather than presenting a chronological or encyclopaedic account of the empire, *What Have We Here?* operates through thematic and visual dissonance. Locke's selection of approximately 150 objects – ranging from royal regalia and coins to looted ceremonial items and ethnographic materials – highlights the uneven power relations that shaped their production, exchange, and acquisition. These artefacts are not treated as inert witnesses to the past but as active participants in histories of conquest, trade, resistance, and cultural transformation. By drawing attention to the biographies of objects, Locke aligns the exhibition with scholarly approaches that emphasise material culture as a site where political authority and cultural meaning are negotiated over time. In the catalogue and press release that accompany the exhibition, Hew Locke explains that "I have always been interested in the way objects are interpreted through display in museums. What story has been chosen and is being told or implied about the past? How does it relate to the present? How can this telling be questioned, disrupted, or complicated? These are the questions I am tackling through this project" (Locke, 2024, p.9).

Central to the exhibition's intellectual framework is Locke's refusal of singular or stable interpretation. Objects associated with British sovereignty such as royal portraits, medals, and colonial currency are placed in dialogue with items taken from colonised societies, including Asante regalia and Indigenous artefacts from the Caribbean and West Africa. This curatorial strategy exposes how symbols of national identity and imperial prestige were constructed in direct relation to extraction, violence, and subjugation elsewhere. At the same time, Locke resists a purely accusatory narrative. Instead, he highlights the ambiguity and mobility of objects, showing how meanings shift as artefacts move across geographies and political regimes, accruing new values while never fully shedding the conditions of their displacement.

Locke's own artistic interventions play a crucial role in destabilising the authority of the museum display. His reworked *Souvenir* sculptures[5], which embellish traditional busts of British monarchs, such as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, with kitsch ornaments and visual excess, parody the aesthetics of commemoration while exposing the ideological labour performed by such objects. Moreover, these works collapse distinctions between high art, popular culture, and historical relics, undermining the hierarchies that museums have traditionally upheld. In doing so, Locke positions himself not only as an artist responding to the collection but as a critical interlocutor within the institution itself. And yet, the constellation of objects displayed in Locke's exhibition intertwin themes such as colonialism, trade, and propaganda that have long been part of Locke's artwork. However, this time, and somehow more intimately, Hew Locke is directly implicating the viewers, asking them to consider the complexities, and the questions raised by the collection and the political implications of the British Museum itself as a colonial space.

Perhaps the most conceptually provocative element of the exhibition is *The Watchers*, a series of newly commissioned sculptural figures distributed throughout the gallery space. These are mixed media figures created specifically for this exhibition, drawing on a wide range of cultural references, materials and visual languages. Positioned throughout the gallery, they are hovered over display cases, embedded in architectural features, and spilling into the Enlightenment Gallery (British Museum, Room 1). Their presence created a kind of Greek chorus that observe visitors and the objects on display, prompting viewers to confront their own role as observers and the power relations implicit in museum display. Locke described *The Watchers* as observers of both *you* (the visitor) and the exhibition, prompting questions about who watches whom and highlighting the biases and assumptions visitors bring to historical objects. They act as both mirrors and commentators, destabilising the usual

[5] The bust of Prince Albert Edward, for example, is decorated with small images of skulls among medals of military expeditions, which are clear reminders to the attentive viewer that the constructions of the empire also came with stories of violence and the destruction of societies and cultures.

power dynamics between spectator and display. Their often exuberant, carnivalesque appearance, blending elements of armour, ceremonial dress, popular culture and found materials, also serves to contrast with the formal authority of museum artifacts, reminding visitors that interpretation itself is an act of storytelling. Perched above cases, embedded within architectural features, and visually interrupting the visitor's movement, *The Watchers* transform the act of viewing into a reciprocal encounter. Their presence foregrounds a central question of the exhibition: who has the authority to look, to classify, and to interpret? By reversing the conventional direction of the gaze, Locke implicates the visitor in the historical power dynamics that underpin museum collections. *The Watchers* function simultaneously as guardians, critics, and witnesses. Thus, those are figures that observe not only the artefacts but also the contemporary audience engaging with them by mysteriously questioning how we arrived at where we are today.

In sum, *What Have We Here?* was designed to leave visitors with more questions than answers, emphasising on the messy reality of history rather than tidy narratives. Moreover, by displaying objects that embody stories of trade, conflict, appropriation and cultural transformation while embedding them with his own creative voice, Locke's exhibition challenged the British Museum's traditional modes of display and encouraged an ongoing conversation about history, ownership and identity. In doing so, the exhibition positioned itself as both a critique and an invitation: to look closer, to question historical narratives, and to reconsider how museums shape our understanding of the past. This exhibition neatly encapsulates Hew Locke´s permanent concern with dominant narratives about the British history and proves to be the catalyst for broader conversations about systemic racial injustice in general, and conversations on how to reckon with a colonial past in particular.

3. A Dialogue Between Grada Kilomba and Hew Locke

Contemporary decolonial art practices increasingly challenge the assumption that colonialism belongs solely to the past. Instead, artists foreground coloniality as an ongoing epistemic, political, and affective condition (Mignolo, 2011). Grada Kilomba's *The Boat* and Hew Locke's *What Have We Here?* exemplify this shift by refusing linear historical narratives and exposing the persistence of colonial violence within present-day cultural institutions. While Kilomba's work operates through performance, voice, and embodiment, Locke's practice unfolds through large-scale sculptural installation within the British Museum. Despite these formal differences, both works converge in their critique of Western historiography, their challenge to the museum as a colonial tool, and their activation of postmemory as a mode of transgenerational transmission of trauma.

The memory of the empire in the Lusophone world differs significantly from that of the British context, particularly in how colonial histories are narrated, institutionalised, and contested. In the

Portuguese case, colonial memory has long been shaped by the ideology of Lusotropicalism (Gilberto Freyre, 1940). This concept presented Portuguese colonialism as uniquely flexible and culturally integrative, emphasizing miscegenation and the supposed absence of rigid racial hierarchies. Such ideas were actively appropriated by the Estado Novo to legitimise the persistence of the empire well into the twentieth century. As a result, public / collective memory in Portugal has often been marked by nostalgia and selective forgetting, where narratives of "discovery" and intercultural contact overshadow histories of violence, exploitation, and slavery. Scholars like Cristiana Bastos (2019) have critically examined how these myths were constructed and disseminated, revealing their political uses and long-term cultural impact. Accordingly, there is a certain glamorisation of Portuguese colonialism / expansionism that overshadows its consequences. Therefore, Margarida Rendeiro points out that "the tensions that existed between Portugal and the former colonies did not vanish overnight, showing that the mild manners ['brandos costumes'] that were part of the Estado Novo's propaganda regarding Portuguese colonialism were rhetorical (2019:3). The so-called tensions are here fundamental to comprehend not only the glamorisation of the Portuguese empire but also complexity entailed in the construction of collective memory. In contrast, the British imperial past is more openly debated, particularly in academic and public spheres. Influential thinkers like Edward Said, through works such as *Orientalism*, and Stuart Hall have shaped critical understandings of empire, race, and representation. Overall, their contributions helped in interrogating imperial legacies. While imperial nostalgia persists in the United Kingdom, it is increasingly challenged by movements that call for historical accountability. Edward Said explains that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw *off* imperial subjection" (1993:8). It is precisely this permanent form of questioning that opens up room for debate and the re-creation of a lively terrain where cultural memory becomes permeable to multiple formations. The ghosts of coloniality are unleashed and made visible when works such as the one created by Hew Locke occupy the public arena.

The contrasting trajectories of decolonisation further deepen these differences. Portugal's prolonged conflicts during the Portuguese Colonial War (1961 – 1974) delayed critical engagement with the past, contributing to a more muted and fragmented memory culture. In contrast, although British decolonisation was also marked by violence, pivotal events such as the Partition of India (1947) have become central reference points in both scholarly and public debates. Ultimately, while both contexts grapple with imperial nostalgia, the Lusophone world tends toward a more ambivalent and

mythologised memory, whereas the British context sustains a more visible and institutionalised culture of critique and historical reckoning.

It can, then, be argued that together, the works by Kilomba and Locke highlight the distinct yet overlapping challenges of postcolonial memory. Kilomba's piece emerges from a context where historical violence has often been muted, making her act of reconstruction particularly urgent. Locke, meanwhile, engages with a landscape already shaped by critique, pushing it further by destabilising the visual archive. Both artists ultimately reveal that confronting empire requires not only revisiting history but also transforming the frameworks through which it is remembered and understood. Nonetheless, both authors partake in the construction of decolonial paths when using their voices / works to pinpoint the need for political and epistemic delinking (Mignolo, 2009).

As previously stated, Kilomba's *The Boat* engages the history of the Middle Passage and the broader legacies of the transatlantic slave trade through a performance that foregrounds voice, bodily presence, and temporal collapse. The work disrupts conventional historical narration by privileging affective and somatic modes of knowing, emphasizing on the ways in which colonial violence is experienced rather than merely represented. In this context, the performer's body functions as an archive of trauma, rendering the psychic and embodied consequences of slavery palpable to the audience. Kilomba's method resonates with the broader project of decolonial aesthetics, wherein knowledge production is shifted from abstraction to experience, and the epistemic authority of Western historiography is called into question (Mignolo, 2011). The performance enacts a radical insistence that the colonial past remains present, highlighting the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the structural continuities of racialised oppression.

It is, hence, my argument here that Locke's installation *What Have We Here?* approaches similar themes through materiality and spatial occupation. The overwhelming accumulation of objects functions as a deliberate aesthetic and conceptual strategy, interrupting the museum's established hierarchies of display and challenging its claims to neutrality and authority. Locke's work enacts a form of decolonial practice by transforming the museum space into a site of critical engagement, confronting visitors with the chaotic legacies of empire and the impossibility of containing such histories within the institutional frameworks that have traditionally shaped their interpretation (Locke, 2024). Where Kilomba uses the body as a medium of resistance and knowledge, Locke uses spatial and material excess to expose the entanglements of imperial histories and contemporary power structures, demonstrating that decolonial strategies in art can operate across both intimate and collective registers.

Assuming that "decolonial tactics seek to stimulate our imaginations and to develop institutions that address the questions posed by decolonization as a programme of absolute disorder" (Vèrges,

2023:179), hence, the relationship between these artistic practices and the museum is particularly revealing when considered through the lens of Françoise Vergès' critique of the museum as a colonial apparatus. Vergès argues that museums function not merely as neutral repositories of cultural artifacts, but as instruments for the classification, extraction, and containment of knowledge in ways that reproduce colonial hierarchies (Vergès, 2023). Kilomba's performance, with its insistence on temporality, embodiment, and affect, problematises the capacity of the museum to accommodate decolonial art. The ephemeral and immersive nature of *The Boat* resists assimilation into the museum's logic of permanence and display, exposing the limitations of institutional frameworks in representing histories of violence without neutralizing their affective force. In contrast, Locke occupies the museum from within, using the very architecture and spatial authority of the British Museum to make visible the legacies of empire. By filling the galleries with dense, materially loaded assemblages, Locke confronts viewers with the overwhelming complexity and violence embedded in Britain's imperial past, demonstrating that the museum itself can be leveraged as a site of critique, even as its structures remain implicated in colonial knowledge production.

Furthermore, it is also possible to argue that both works also resonate profoundly with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which describes the ways in which subsequent generations internalise and transmit the memories of traumatic events they did not directly experience (Hirsch, 2012). In Kilomba, postmemory is enacted through the performative body, which bears the weight of inherited trauma and renders it perceptible in the present moment. The audience encounters not a historical reenactment but a lived transmission of psychic and emotional residue, where the past is both absent and profoundly felt. Locke's work, by contrast, materialises postmemory through objects and spatial arrangements. His ships, encrusted with visual and material symbols of empire, function as carriers of collective memory and historical violence, implicating viewers within the structures that continue to shape contemporary life. In this sense, Locke externalises postmemory, distributing it across space, material culture, and architectural form, while Kilomba internalises it, concentrating it within embodied experience. Both strategies, however, underscore the persistence of colonial trauma across temporal and spatial scales, underlining that memory and history are never fully contained within narrative or archive.

Another final point to be kept in mind is that *The Boat* directly confronts Gilberto Freyre's notion of Lusotropicalism by exposing the violence and erasure underpinning Portuguese colonial narratives. Rather than celebrating cultural "mixing" as harmonious, Kilomba centres the Middle Passage as trauma, rendering the boat as a site of death, rupture, and silenced histories. Through fragmented storytelling and embodied memory, the work enacts decolonial praxis when it refuses Eurocentric historiography and reclaims Black subjectivity. In Foucauldian terms, it produces a

counter-memory by displacing official archives with affective, diasporic remembrance, challenging what counts as knowledge and whose voices are legitimised. Therefore, it is my argument here that Grada Kilomba's performance *The Boat* challenges dominant narratives of Portugal's colonial past by reworking both postmemory and counter-memory. In Portugal, this often manifests as a muted or sanitised memory of slavery and empire. Kilomba problematises this by staging a collective, embodied reenactment of the Middle Passage, refusing distance: participants physically enact memory, collapsing the gap between past and present. In doing so, this disrupts the passive, inherited nature of postmemory and turns it into lived, affective experience. At the same time, *The Boat* constructs a counter-memory that resists official national narratives celebrating "discoveries." By centring Black bodies, voices, and trauma, Kilomba exposes the silences in Portuguese historiography and challenges myths of benign colonialism. In Portugal's context, where colonial violence is often under-acknowledged, Kilomba's work transforms memory into a political act. It not only critiques how history is remembered but actively reclaims space for marginalised histories, unsettling national identity and historical amnesia.

Alternatively, *What Have We Here?* by Hew Locke operates through accumulation and visual excess, reworking imperial iconography (photographs, trophies, regalia) to reveal the spectacle and absurdity of the empire. *What Have We Here?* by Hew Locke complicates both postmemory (the inherited memory of past generations) and counter-memory (alternative narratives that challenge dominant histories) within the UK's imperial context. Rather than presenting a stable inherited past, Locke fragments imperial imagery into dense, layered installations. To a certain extent, this disrupts postmemory by showing that what is "inherited" is neither coherent nor neutral but mediated through institutions like the British Museum. Viewers have the possibility to confront how imperial memory is curated, aestheticized, and selectively transmitted. At the same time, the exhibition resists a simple counter-memory stance. Instead of offering a clear oppositional narrative, Locke overloads the visual field with conflicting symbols in which the Empire is perceived as spectacle, violence, and nostalgia simultaneously. This ambiguity problematises the idea that counter-memory can fully "correct" official history. In the British context, where imperial legacies remain embedded in national identity, Locke suggests that memory is not a binary construction (official *vs.* resistant), but a contested, unstable process shaped by power, display, and interpretation. Thus, the exhibition exposes memory itself as constructed, implicating both institutions and audiences in its ongoing negotiation. While Kilomba's work is immersive and mournful, displaying absence and trauma, Locke's is archival and satirical, exposing colonial power through irony and material overload. Both destabilise imperial memory, but where Kilomba constructs an intimate counter-memory rooted in embodied loss, Locke stages a critical re-reading of the archive, highlighting how the empire aestheticized domination.

What these artworks have in common is, then, their ability to foreground affect, materiality, and spatial engagement. Above all, Kilomba and Locke exemplify contemporary practices of decolonial art that seek to destabilise colonial narratives and institutional authority. Their works demonstrate that decoloniality is not merely a matter of content, but of form, process, and experience (Lugones, 2025; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Where Kilomba confronts audiences with the immediacy of bodily trauma, Locke confronts them with the overwhelming legacies of empire in the material world[6], highlighting the diverse ways in which artistic interventions can function as critical instruments of memory, critique, and decolonial action. Moreover, they employ a semiotic system that calls for "the need for political and epistemic de-linking […] as well as decolonization and decolonial knowledges, [that are] necessary steps for imagining and building democratic, just and non-imperial/colonial societies" (Mignolo, 2009, p.160). Rather than simply contesting and / or unveiling epistemic silences, Kilomba and Locke implicate their audiences in the process of questioning official and glorified narratives. What their geo-politics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009) does is to de-silence the epistemic privilege of the West (namely British and Portuguese empires) by exposing human, intellectual and scientific exploitation. Consequently, their artworks are instrumental to bring forth both awareness of the past and the ongoing, recurring, and ingrained systemic racism that has characterised modern societies.

Conclusion

Taken together, *The Boat* and *What Have We Here?* articulate decolonial praxis not as a metaphorical or discursive position, but as a materially and affectively grounded practice enacted through artistic form, process, and institutional encounter. These works demonstrate how contemporary art can function as a site of epistemic struggle, generating counter-archives that refuse the silences, erasures, and linear temporalities through which colonial histories have been normalised and sanitised. Rather than offering representational corrections to dominant narratives, Kilomba and Locke mobilise art as an active force that intervenes in how history is felt, spatialised, and authorised

[6] Despite using this specific terminology – material world – it is necessary to highlight that throughout Locke's exhibition, viewers are often confronted with the impact of colonialism on indigenous ecosystems and how animals and plants were consumed by settlers and later displayed in museological collections across Europe. There is a particular interesting example of the Harry Emanuel's hummingbird necklace (1865) displayed in Locke's exhibition in a cabinet alongside with other artifacts created using natural elements such as beetles and feathers. These objects appear with usual information provided by the British Museum and a yellow post-it containing the type of information that can be perceived as "the other side of history" (i.e., "In this object, the South American birds' heads are mounted as jewellery, a vivid example of the 19th-century craze for using real bird parts in fashion and a reminder of how such tastes were linked with colonial trade in natural "exotics" Hew Locke, The British Museum).

within the museum. In doing so, they partake on the notion that decoloniality is an ongoing, unfinished process, one that must be continually rehearsed, embodied, and contested.

Kilomba's *The Boat* enacts decolonial praxis through an insistence on affective memory and embodied witnessing. By activating the sensorial and emotional registers of spectatorship, the work disrupts the museum's traditional positioning of the viewer as a detached observer of historical knowledge. Memory here is not static or archival but performative and relational, demanding ethical engagement and implicating the viewer within histories of racialised violence. This affective strategy resists the colonial logic of distanced contemplation and instead proposes a mode of knowing grounded in vulnerability, discomfort, and shared responsibility. Kilomba's work thus exemplifies how decolonial art destabilises epistemic hierarchies by privileging lived experience, oral transmission, and emotional resonance as legitimate forms of historical knowledge.

Conversely, Hew Locke's *What Have We Here?* operates through material accumulation, visual excess, and spatial disruption to expose the ornamental and aestheticized dimensions of imperial power. By reconfiguring colonial decorative motifs within the museum space, Locke renders visible the entanglement of beauty, wealth, and violence that underpins imperial visual culture. His intervention transforms the museum from a site of passive display into a contested terrain where colonial authority is unsettled through over-saturation and visual noise. This strategy not only challenges the museum's claim to neutrality but also reveals how imperial ideologies persist through material culture, display practices, and curatorial frameworks. Locke's work therefore performs decolonial praxis at an institutional scale, confronting viewers with the unresolved legacies embedded within the very architecture of cultural authority.

Crucially, both artists demonstrate that decolonial strategies operate across multiple registers both affective and material, intimate and collective, embodied and spatial. Their practices align with Mignolo's notion of epistemic disobedience by refusing Western historiography's linearity, universality, and claims to objectivity. Instead, they have chosen to problematise fragmented temporalities, intergenerational trauma, and the structural continuities of racialised oppression, insisting that colonialism must be understood as an enduring condition rather than a closed historical chapter. In this sense, decolonial art does not simply critique colonial histories but actively produces alternative modes of knowing, remembering, and relating. Seen, analysed and discussed together these artworks stark innovation that resist the politics of erasure.

Furthermore, these artistic interventions reconfigure public and institutional spaces as sites of active resistance. By situating suppressed narratives within museums that are institutions historically complicit in the production and legitimisation of colonial knowledge, Kilomba and Locke expose the contradictions of institutional memory while simultaneously repurposing these spaces as arenas for

critical confrontation. Such practices resonate with Vergès's conception of memory-activism, wherein remembrance becomes a political act aimed at dismantling dominant epistemologies and imagining more just futures. The museum, rather than serving as a repository of settled histories, is reimagined as a dynamic space of struggle where meaning, authority, and visibility are continuously negotiated. It remains imperative to conceptualise decolonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist institutions that refuse the logics of extraction underpinning racial capitalism. Such institutions would instead cultivate epistemic curiosity, collective care, and practices oriented toward confronting structural injustice, inequality, and sexism. In this sense, defeat is not an endpoint but a site of political possibility, a terrain upon which new imaginaries can be constructed. Through sustained practices, these imaginaries may be nourished and rendered possible (Vèrges, 2023).

Ultimately, this analysis underscores that decolonisation, as enacted through contemporary art, is neither a symbolic gesture nor a representational inclusion of marginalised voices, rather it contributes to devise an ethic memory. It is a transformative encounter that unfolds at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology in order to create spaces in which reparation (or the attempt of) may occur by means of also decolonising knowledge (its production and consumption). Through their distinct yet complementary practices, Kilomba and Locke demonstrate how art can function as a decolonial tool that unsettles hegemonic modes of knowledge production, reactivates suppressed histories, and invites viewers into processes of critical self-reflection and accountability. Their works remind us of that decolonial futures are forged through practices of remembering and resisting, practices that demand sustained engagement rather than mere closure. Engaging critically with such artistic interventions is therefore fundamental to advancing a more inclusive social imaginary and to recognising art's capacity to operate as a powerful form of decolonial praxis within and against institutional frameworks.

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