

On Amazement and Borders

I'm still amazed by the fact that the European Union received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. The organization was hailed for the fact that it was an achievement towards peace on the continent. It assured that the wars of the previous centuries between the various states would be a thing of the past. The prize was not awarded for peace dashed elsewhere by the initiation or participation of its Member States in wars elsewhere, but for peace here. In our direct vicinity. In the proximity of where the Nobel Peace Prize gets handed out every year.

There's much to be said about the prize, that was also awarded to Martin Luther King Jr in 1964, a year later he would receive an honorary doctorate from the VU University in Amsterdam, and Barack Obama in 2008, 8 years before he would drop 26.171 bombs during the last year of his presidency in the name of hunting terrorists on soil that was not American or European. Bombs, software infrastructures and guiding systems that were most probably developed and/or built in Europe. When the prize was awarded to the European Union it was also on the eve of the wider acknowledgment of people fleeing war and famine and the hostility of the Union towards their plight. This was a year after the Arab Spring and the ensuing civil and proxy wars would lead to a mass mobilization towards safety by those being bombed and caught in the crossfire. Mobilization towards safer soil and to the borders of the Union that are being heavily guarded by Frontex and expanded further and further beyond the geography of Europe itself.

Due to the activities of the past and the present the borders of the European Union extend well into the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea and the African continent. They're there in through the existence of European colonies now classified under different names and refugee detention centres in countries that have been paid to stop the migration of people into Europe. When commenting on the racist terror that has been Trump's presidency in the United States and his rhetorical reliance on a border wall to shield the conglomeration of the former Dutch, French, British colonies, that also house Scandinavian, Baltic and Eastern European colonists, that is the US, we in Europe forget our own institutions of harm. The presentation of the Union as a beacon of peace within its borders is hypocritical and offensive.

The solidarity among the Member States during the economic meltdowns and the way in which especially the Dutch and German governments responded was appalling. An entire generation in the Southern European nations was sacrificed to balance the books. The hypocrisy was also apparent when taking into account the simultaneous expansion of European borders mixed with the animosity, anchored in fantasies of white supremacy, towards borders of others. This, coupled with the restriction of the movement of people whose borders are being violated, is striking. The logic underpinning this hypocrisy of the European Union is a colonial logic that I have been trying to interrogate and trip up in my art practice and writing.

When considering the European Union as the continuation in another form of the colonial logic that pushed for the expansion of European nation states, I have to think of Gurminder Bhambra. Funnily enough she raised this point in Amsterdam in 2018 at the University of Amsterdam's university theatre. When she said it, it felt like another call to remember that the

honorary doctorate for King was entangled with the Dutch signing an habit of deflecting conversations on race relations within the Kingdom by showing solidarity with struggles elsewhere. In 1964, the Netherlands signed a recruitment treaty with Turkey for Turkish laborers, but there had been laborers here since 1960, and five years later the Dutch would sign one with Morocco as well. These contracts were an echo of the Dutch contract laborers that were shipped from the then British colony India to the then Dutch colony Surinam after the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands in 1863 to fulfil the work on the plantations. Of course we should not gloss over the agency of these laborers but the repetition of the procedural steps taking by the Dutch government to facilitate the procurement of cheap labour for their industries is eerie. Also considering the fact that this was a widespread practice among European countries that were still rebuilding after Nazism and fascism tore through Europe.

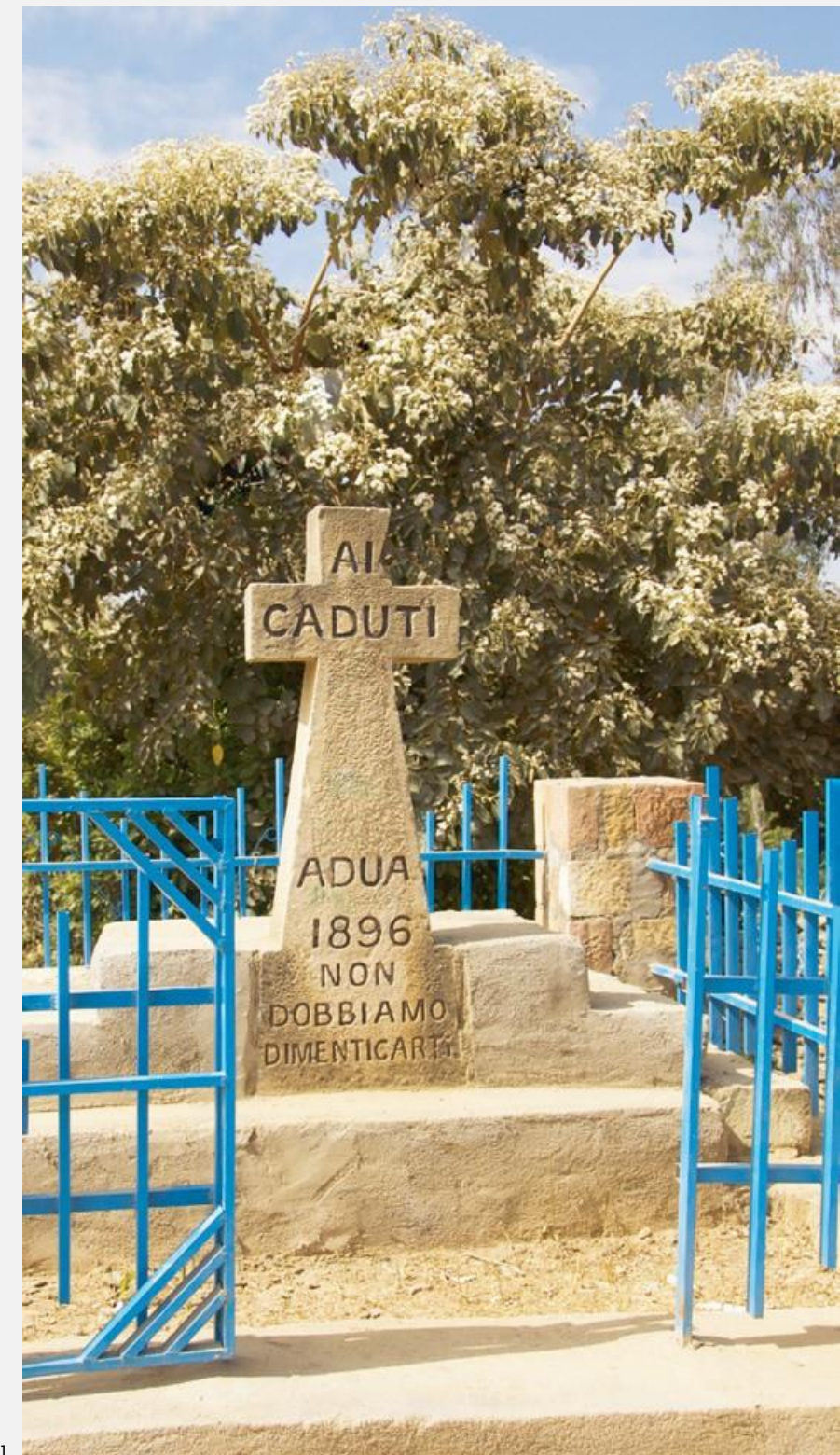
Bhambra's statement was something that she had been working on for a while and has been publishing about quite extensively. I first met her in 2013 in Berlin at the Black Europe Body Politics conference curated by the late Alanna Lockward. Bhambra was there for several editions and I have been a fan ever since of her sharp, meaningful and insightful scholarship. It was a groundbreaking series that continues even after the untimely death of Lockward in 2018. Lockward had scoured Europe finding people who were contributing to critical practices concerning decoloniality, Marronage and Blackness via academia, the arts and activism. Setting up a curatorial group together with, among others, Walter Mignolo, Rolando Vázquez and Jeannette Ehlers, she set out to provide a challenging space to have these conversations and push for a necessary criticality. Each edition had it's own thematic focus and the series ranged from looking at decolonial aesthetics to decolonizing the Cold War to coalitions facing whiteness. The editions included returning voices and had a generative quality in that Lockward's magnetism and determination ensured constant additions of refreshing insights and practices beyond the core group.

Congregating in Berlin on a subsonic level felt like an attempt to repair the damage done by the Berlin Conference of 1884. That was a reorganization of live and death across borders that reduced the heterogeneity found on the African continent to the parameters set by the Belgians, British, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italians. The Dutch had already traded their occupied territories of the Dutch Gold Coast to the British through the Second Sumatra Treaty of 1872 for the exclusive rights to the territory. A war ensued that lasted from 1873 until 1904 when the Sultanate of Aceh, which had been an Ottoman empire protectorate since the 16th century, refused to acquiesce the Dutch demand for full control of the region. The war ended up

consolidating the islands under Dutch rule but also solidified the opposition to the Dutch colonial presence. The Sumatra treaty also included the permission to recruit Indian contract laborers for Dutch plantations that was referred to earlier.

The Black Europe Body Politics conference however attempted to decentralize the European understanding of the world, of living, of the arts and the ways in which we contemplate about what we do.

In those conversations and exchanges during the conference I found not just the energy to continue with my work in the Netherlands but also obscured knowledge. It was Robbie Shilliam, whom I also befriended through the Black Europe Body Politics conference series, who told me about the Negus Menelik II hall in Nova Scotia where Marcus Garvey gave his speech about mental slavery that Bob Marley references in *Redemption Song*.





2

Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican American activist who, among other actions in the 1910s and 1920s, attempted to charter voyages back to Africa for people of African descent in the United States and the Caribbean gave speeches in various venues. In Nova Scotia the Black community there named their community venue after Negus Menelik II, the Emperor of Abyssinia who defeated the Italian forces in 1896 when the Italians attempted to colonize what is now known as Ethiopia. This was a loss that the fascist regime in Italy remembered forty years later when they returned to occupy Ethiopia in 1935, slaughtered 30.000 people in three days in 1936 and erected a monument to commemorate their fallen soldiers at the Battle of Adwa.

In 2013, in the Italian town Affi, a monument was erected to honour Rodolfo Graziani, Benito Mussolini's war minister and the one who ordered the massacre that is still remembered every year on Yekatit 12, 19 February. It was this history that my brother and I tried to remember publicly and repair with the building of a temporary monument during the Salone del Mobile manifestation in 2016. In between two olive trees, three times a day, fifteen minutes each time and for six consecutive days. It was a multilingual dissection of conflict around the Treaty of Wuchale that led to the war that also revealed that back then in 2016 the majority of the refugees who were reaching the shores of Europe came from the former Italian colony of Eritrea, the territory that Menelik II gave to the Italians after the war. That the majority are now being smuggled out via Libya, another former colony of Italy, one of the original Member States of the European Economic Community, should be remembered as well.

In 2018, Gurminder Bhambra was in Amsterdam as one of the three keynote lectures for the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis conference

Dissecting Violence, together with Étienne Balibar and Zeynep Gambetti. After all three gave their keynotes over the course of the conference there was a plenary questions round with all three. This was also at the height of the academic purge that was happening at the time in Turkey and Gambetti made sure to keep us aware of the violence that ensured the suppression of dissenting voices. Criticality was being attacked and patriotism was being presented as the most important quality to have in a time of crisis. When Balibar called upon Kant's writing as a prism to understand our current situation Bhambra eloquently demolished the offh manner in which Kant and his ilk are recalled. It was astounding how she was able to simultaneously present Kant's thinking better than Balibar and expose it as utterly racist and thus a tainted well of knowledge.

My brief description of the encounter between Bhambra and Balibar does a bit of a disservice to the care and sophistication with which she handled the situation, but it was a moment that I'm forever grateful to have witnessed. Here a thinker had the quickness of spirit to respond succinctly with wit and a depth of knowledge that opened up other wells of complexity. Not only did she diligently offset the excessive time that Balibar had taken up with his intellectual manspreading on the panel, but it was also a call to all of us present to sharpen our critical and reparative focus.

When I was invited, in what seems like a lifetime ago, to be part of the Another Europe Is Possible podcast hosted by Luke Cooper and Zoe Williams I wanted to emphasize this notion of reparations when thinking of that other Europe. Repairing the damage done by Europe needs to be at the forefront of the conversation. What caught my ear as well in the invitation was that it would be about the fall of the Iron Curtain

thirty years earlier. Together with András Bozóki, Alena Ivanova and Mary Kaldor, we were in the Amsterdam Public Library near Amsterdam Central Station on a Wednesday evening in December. This was a day before the elections in Britain that would bafflingly cement Boris Johnson as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and before the bad and necropolitical policy decisions around health care, by governments far and wide, allowed the SARS-CoV-2 virus to lead to a horrifyingly large number of preventable deaths. The parasitic neo-liberal logic made mainstream in the 1980s through policies pursued by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, that pushed for the privatization of public utilities such as the healthcare system and cut down funding for healthcare, as part of demands for economic packages to repair the damage done by the economic crash of 2008, was sowing what it reaped; it was taking the lives of those it classified as expendable.

On the sixth floor we were sitting with a distance to each other that was closer than the now ubiquitous meter and half and talking about the moments leading up to and after the actual fall of the Iron Curtain. During the podcast taping it were Kaldor and Bozóki who recalled how they planned and organized for another Europe in the 1980s. They were intimately involved in the activist movements and political roundtables that came before the fall of the Soviet regime and spoke about on-the-ground specifics and recalled names and organizations that painted a vivid picture. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the response of the Soviet regime at that moment in time was completely different than the iron fist approach displayed during the Tiananmen square student protests in China six months earlier. And this difference of approach was also felt in the Soviet satellites that were regaining their sovereignty.

Growing up in post-Soviet Bulgaria, Alena Ivanova noted that for her as a child she didn't know any better than to have regular picnics. She later learned that the choice to have picnics were actually creative solutions by her parents to deal with scarcity that came with the sudden and all-encompassing collapse of the state-run systems around them. For her it was a world in which anything was possible.

Just before coming on the podcast I was in Latvia, another post-Soviet country, for an upcoming exhibition entitled Communicating Diffi Pasts, curated by Ieva Astakova and Margaret Tali. Latvia joined the European Union in 2004 after a referendum in 2003 in which two-thirds of the enfranchised population who cast a ballot voted to join. Two years before the vote the musical Tobago!, written by Māra Zālīte and composed by Uldis Marhilēvičs, opened and retold the story of the participation of Latvians in European colonial expansion and occupation in the Caribbean. Although Latvia as a country only came into existence in 1918, the achievements of the Duchy

of Courland have been claimed in an attempt to foster a national identity to counter the violence of the Soviet occupation. Connected to this search in the past for possible futures is the rebuilding of the House of the Blackheads in Riga immediately after the Soviet Occupation. The Blackheads were bachelor merchants who took the Roman Theban army commander Saint Mauricius as their patron saint and have the head of an African man in their seal. Walking through the museum I was struck by how it was filled with 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century slavery iconography while not mentioning anything about the Latvian slave trade or occupation and colonization of Tobago and Kunta Kinteh island, formerly called James Island, at the mouth of the Gambia River.

Even this new European Union Member is explicitly connecting itself to the European project through its violent colonial past, however brief it may have been. The question then is can we fundamentally conceptualize another Europe Union and alter it beyond the complaints of bureaucracy and towards the understanding of peace as a plea for justice? Can we change this Union to see justice over profits? Will the current conditions provide us with the opportunities to seize the momentum away from the fascist tendencies that seem to be bubbling back up? I hope so and will continue to make work and speak up.