

# Overcoming Hegememory

Sharon Dodua Otoo

Keynote at the opening of the event: “Kolonialismus Erinnern”

Thursday, April 25<sup>th</sup> 2024

Distinguished visitors of the delegation from the year 2024

Ladies, gentlemen, and esteemed guests

Welcome. It is an honour to address you all on this extremely special day: April 25<sup>th</sup> 2085. It has been 61 years since the pathbreaking *Erinnerungskonzept Kolonialismus* or “Colonialism Remembrance Concept for Berlin” was first presented during a three-day event in this very same venue. I am aware that especially those delegates, who are joining us from 2024, will be eager to see the results of their efforts and we will get to that in due course.

I have been requested however to include in my opening remarks an overview of the historical milestones within German Remembrance Culture that have finally been achieved. For it is barely imaginable now, but there was a time - for some of us here today within living memory - where the primary means of

conducting, accessing and distributing historical research was through the written word. Simply put, if the history of a people did not appear in a book, an academic paper or a newspaper article, then it was for the most part inaccessible, if not deliberately suppressed or ignored. And even those scholars, who did have their research findings published, were too often ridiculed, marginalised or in the worst cases forced into obscurity, if their conclusions did not align with the dominant perspectives of the day.

In recognition of this, and in an effort to promote reconciliation, the concept of “shared history” emerged towards the end of the twentieth, and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Many institutions and organisations responsible for coordinating projects in remembrance of state-led atrocities used this term. However, for some inhabitants of formerly colonised countries, the phrase “shared history” was considered deeply problematic.

As the Kenian author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor so devastatingly put it during her iconic keynote address, which took place back in October 2020 at the opening of the International Conference “Colonialism as Shared History. Past, Present, Future”:

[quote] when a psychopath enters a family’s home and proceeds to rape, rob, eviscerate and murder them, and then settles in, takes over the family pets, the premises, the lands. Starts growing grapes and mines the gold he finds there, and then becomes extremely wealthy in the process, marries a well-brought up delicate lily from his home town, becomes a source of wisdom and starts to host the finest of classical music soirées, builds a reputation as an impressive family patriarch and, later his statue is raised in his home town on the day he establishes an endowment for scholarships in the humanities [...]

no matter what, the brutalised, displaced, victimised family upon whose annihilation the psychopath has built an impressive life, that wounded family, if any do survive, cannot engage the atrocity that decimated their relationship with existence as something of a ‘shared experience’. The original inhumanity, the violation of an intrinsic and basic covenant of human relationality, the desecration of human dignity and decency forbid it [end quote].

We have come a long way since those times. Nowadays, even our primary school children can recite the iconic war speech of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, give a guided tour of Martin Dibobe’s Berlin, as well as recite poetry about the heroism of Samuel Maharero off by heart.

Nowadays due to incredible advances made in Emotional Intelligence (or E.I.) we are able to access the allyship skills of Albert Einstein, who was not only a member of the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression, but was given a place on its Brussels Honorary Presidium in 1927. The same technology gives us access to the empathy skills of Hannah Arendt, who wrote an apology to Ralph Ellison in 1965 after she read his critique of her controversial “Reflections on Little Rock.” Her letter is a masterclass in the fine art of saying sorry.

No one who sat in this room back in April 2024, when Dr. Ibou Coulibaly Diop first presented the *Erinnerungskonzept Kolonialismus* to the public, could have ever dreamed that this would one day be possible. And certainly not already now in 2085!

By happy circumstance, our celebration today coincides with two exciting anniversaries. Firstly, it is exactly 100 years since Marty McFly successfully returned back to the future after having accidentally travelled to the past, almost preventing his own parents from falling in love, and thus threatening his own existence.

Of greater significance however is the fact that today is also the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the book *De l'égalité des races humaines* or “On the Equality of Human Races” by the Haitian anthropologist, diplomat, and politician, Joseph-Anténor Firmin. Many of the delegates from 2024 may be hearing his name for the first time, so I hope everyone else can bear with me while I provide a brief introduction.

Firmin published his treatise in French in 1885 at a time when the field of anthropology was dominated by the superstition that human populations could be categorised into what was then known as “biological races”; and furthermore, that there was a natural hierarchy, within which the so-called “white race” was superior to all others. While many of his contemporaries busied themselves with measuring skulls and developing theories about the “Aryan master race”, Firmin demonstrated in over 600 pages that [quote]:

...human beings everywhere are endowed with the same qualities and defects without distinction based on color or anatomical shape. The races are equal; they are all capable of rising to the most noble virtues, of reaching the highest intellectual development; they are equally capable of falling into a state of total degeneration [end quote].

It would take more than a hundred years for genetic research to confirm the simple fact: that distinct biological human races do not exist. Imagine how

much pain, suffering, tragedy, and generational trauma could have been avoided if Firmin's colleagues had listened to him at the time and taken his findings seriously! However, the legacy of pseudo-scientific race theory would continue to contaminate human interactions for rest of the nineteenth, the entire twentieth, and for a large part of the twenty-first century.

Indeed, some of the guests sitting here today spent their childhood years in a world which was still divided into nation states. In this very area, a place formerly known as Germany, human beings were imprisoned in so-called "asylum centres" for the sole "crime" of seeking refuge in this part of the world. And the deaths of thousands of other human beings - including the elderly, the disabled and the very young - were simply tolerated year upon year, through negligent, if not to say murderous, border policies. So-called "foreigners" and "migrants" were spoken of, as if they were the root of all evil. As if they did not dance. As if they did not dream. As if they did not love.

It became the work of poets, like the Somali British writer Warsan Shire, to remind us [quote]:

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well. The boy you went to school with, who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory, is holding a gun bigger than his body. You only leave home when home won't let you stay [end quote]

In those times, the climate catastrophe, which we have meanwhile successfully averted, thanks to a massive and sustained collective effort, was rarely seen as a direct consequence of colonial aggression and exploitation. And with the

possible exception of a few heroic humanitarian organisations, no-one targeted the root causes of economic hardship and political instability in the regions from which people were forced to flee. It is difficult to imagine now, but - shamefully - this scapegoating of some of the world's most vulnerable people was so widespread and uncontroversial, that European policy-makers simply increased their reliance on deterrence, pushbacks, imprisonment, and deportation as a solution to what they then called "the migrant crisis", what we now speak of as "the citizenship crisis."

It was within this context that a German culture of remembrance at the state level was growing. One which threatened to focus predominantly on the guilt and shame of the perpetrators of genocide and their descendants. One in which the dominant narratives produced a distorted logic, which led to the descendants of perpetrators putting all their energies into demonstrating that they were *Weltmeister des Erinnerns*, or the world champions of memory, instead of fighting like hell to establish the conditions to ensure that state-sanctioned persecution, dehumanisation, and mass murder would never occur again.

So how did we get to where we are today?

How did we overcome Hegememory?

At the beginning of my talk, I mentioned that in the past, historical research relied heavily on the written word – with specific reference to academic and journalistic texts. Thankfully, however, we also had art. Particularly in those

communities, whose history was either minimalised, distorted or entirely absent from dominant memory culture, art was used not only as a mode for expression, but also as a means to access ancestral knowledge: in particular, the knowledge of those, who, in the words of the US American writer, activist and poet, Audre Lorde, “were never meant to survive.”

We learned that it is better to speak. And we learned to listen to each other. Quite unlike the situation over two hundred years ago, when the contemporaries of Joseph-Anténor Firmin completely refused to engage with his ideas, we now recognise each other. We now know that every single one of us is the culmination of generations.

“I’ve known rivers”, wrote Langston Hughes in his 1921 poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of  
human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Perhaps the most significant historical milestone of the past sixty years was the reaching of an understanding that in order to truly listen to each other, we would need to overcome Hegememory's fixation on national languages for national borders. We would need to learn each other's languages and embrace multilinguality. And not the kind of multilinguality that created and upheld categories of desirable and undesirable languages. And not the kind of multilinguality that lead to some languages becoming the so-called "official language" while forcing other languages to be taken to the grave with their last remaining speakers.

No.

We achieved the kind of multilinguality which recognised that there are many ways of speaking and that sometimes silence is the most revealing form of communication of all.



Back at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the dominant language used in this area of the world was German audio language. At the time it was widely agreed that there was a “correct” or “native” way to speak this language. Anyone who spoke with a non-native accent would be regarded in the best case as exotic. Such a person might frequently experience being congratulated for how well they had mastered the language they were speaking – regardless of how well they actually spoke the language, and regardless of how long they had been living in the region where the language was spoken.

Research consistently demonstrated that those individuals who spoke with a so-called non-native accent were judged by so-called native speakers to be less intelligent, less competent, and less educated. So, along with the general anti-migrant sentiment I mentioned earlier in this talk, it was attitudes like this, which eventually led to multilingual people in this region ceasing to use the German language as a means of communication altogether.

But before this happened, back in 2022, the British-German novelist of Ghanaian heritage, Sharon Dodua Otoo, was approached by organisers of the Cologne-based project *Die Baustelle – Aus Konservierung wird Konversation* or “The Construction Site – From Conservation to Conversation” and she was commissioned to write a piece of work for it. The resulting poem, “Three Languages”, was presented as part of an exhibition in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum. The poem, which I will now share with you, is written in German, English and Ga, a language that was commonly spoken in the region once known as Accra in Ghana.

Ga wiemo ~ English language ~ Deutsche Sprache

Ofaine miŋa bo! Te oyoo tɛŋŋ? Mi hu, miye jogbanŋ.

Ofaine miitao mabi bo sane.

Mɛi pii amɛtseo mi Sharon Dodua Otoo shi amɛɛɛ mi shia gbɛi. Mɛni hewo?

Mi tse ke mi nye amɛtseo mi Naa Dodua. Sharon ji mi blɔfo gbɛi.

Biane mihio shi ye Berlin ke mi wieo German.

Mɛɛba wo nyɛɛɛ wɔwie Ga? Jeee shika sane!

Blɔfomei amɛ tsemɛi, amɛ fa gbɛ.

Amɛ tee Ghana ke Nigeria ke manɔɔŋ pii.

*Mɛni hewo amɛ nyɛɛɛwie Ga?*

Amɛ ju wo niibii, shi mɛɛba amɛ koo wo Ga wiemo?

Biane mi kase Ga. ɛwa shi ɛfɛɛ noko.

Miitao wo fɛɛɛ wɔba wie Ga. Ke shi blɔfomei amɛkase Ga, amɛba na akeshi Gamei le wiemo

Wɔwieo!

Ona?

Wɔ ba tsɔ bo!

Oyiwala donṅ!

Greetings! Here is my second text.

Let me tell you about the first.

I was going to provide a translation of it into English

and then into German,

but actually, there are so many gaps. I want to tell you about the words that escaped.

All my texts begin with silence.

In the languages available to me,

I forage for letters and syllables, like shards of broken glass,

I piece them together and if the splinters don't cut me,

I can create a beautiful mosaic.

These are the thoughts that carry me from

one word to the next

one line to the next

one paragraph to the next

until one page becomes two and ...

While I write I always remember

We speak!

You see?

We will show you!

Yet each of my languages are borrowed

and so in this colonial one, my question is:

Why were so many objects stolen from Ghana and Nigeria and so many Black countries but the languages left behind? Obviously they would not have had to pay for lessons.

*Why did the thieves not speak Ga?*

Silence.

(Almost.)

(Keep listening.)

Ich grüße Sie!

Diesmal auf Deutsch.

(Also, die Art von Deutsch, die ich verwende, samt Grammatikfehlern und Anglizismen, Pausen und Klammern.)

Viele kennen mich unter den Namen Sharon Dodua Otoo und sie dürfen mich auch gerne weiterhin so adressieren.

Allerdings ist Name nicht korrekt, nicht ganz.

Bei der Registrierung meiner Geburt,

(so erzählte es mir neulich meine Mutter beim Mittagessen)

ist irgendwem ein Fehler unterlaufen.

Eigentlich geht mein Name auf meine Oma (väterlicherseits) zurück.

Sie hieß Dodua. Da ich nach ihr benannt bin, heiße ich richtigerweise:

Naa Dodua

(Denn wenn meine Onkel und Tanten mich rufen, rufen sie eigentlich sie. Es heißt so viel wie Oma Dodua)

Sharon – so haben meine Eltern mich aber genannt. Denn das ist die Art von Namen, der den Weißen versichern sollte: Unsere Tochter wird sich hier, in dem Land, in dem sie geboren wurde, zugehörig fühlen! Sie wird sich integrieren! Sie wird freundlich und höflich sein!

Ich grüße Sie!

Jetzt wohne ich in Berlin und ich spreche Deutsch. Sogar viel besser als Ga. Eine Sache, die ich sehr bedauere. Also stelle ich die Frage nun zum dritten Mal:

Warum können wir uns nicht auf Ga unterhalten? Es liegt nicht am fehlenden Geld!

Vor längerer Zeit wurden Objekte aus Ghana und Nigeria und vielen anderen Schwarzen Ländern gestohlen. Warum haben sie die Sprachen nicht mitgenommen?

*Warum konnten die Diebe kein Ga?*

Darauf gibt es keine schöne Antwort.

Denn es war gewollt, dass eine Stille entsteht, wo unsere  
Lieder, Gedichte, Geschichten und epische Romane  
hätten sein sollen.

Es war gewollt, dass unsere Schreie hinter einer Glaswand  
verschwinden, übertönt von hämischem Gelächter, vom Blinken  
gieriger Kinderaugen und mit diversen Katalognummern versehen.

Es war gewollt, dass meine Ahn\*innen hierzulande kein Gehör  
finden. Doch sie sprechen.

Wir sprechen!

Sehen Sie?

Wir zeigen es Ihnen!

Also hier endet der dritte Text.

Und im ersten beginnt meine Reise zurück

Zurück in die Sprache Ga.

\*begleiten Sie mich\*

To my sisters, brothers and siblings who are visiting from 2024 and are about to return there, I have one specific message for you: Overcoming hegemony will be hard. It will require an immense amount of effort and sacrifice. You may not see the fruits of your labour within your lifetime.

Please remember that it is still worth it.

Yes, the path is rocky, full of potholes and in desperate need of repair. Believe me I know. But please also remember, and hold dear to your hearts, the immortal words of Dr. Emmett Brown at the end of the first *Back to the Future* film: “Roads? Where we are going, we don’t need roads.”

At the time of its publication, Firmin’s book received no reception, his findings were ignored by his contemporaries and his work fell into obscurity. This, even though he made the effort to write in their dominant language: French. However, this did not deter him, because he published his book with us in mind. Indeed, in the preface he wrote [quote]:

I wish for my race, wherever in the world it lives and governs itself, that it will break with arbitrary customs, with the systematic contempt for laws and liberty, with the disdain for legal forms and distributive justice [...]

Dignified and proud, intelligent and hard-working, let this black race, so full of sap and generous vitality, grow, prosper and rise steadily, from progress to progress! To help it in its ascent, there can never be too many workers or too much dedication. So it is religiously that I bring my humble and respectful offering. Others will do better than me, one day, but no one will be more eager for its rise and its glory [end quote]

The others he was speaking of are we. We are our ancestors’ wildest dreams.

Ladies, gentlemen, and esteemed guests, I would like to close this opening address with one more quote from Joseph-Ant nor Firmin, as I believe his words ring as true for all of us today, as the day he first penned them two hundred years ago – and in addition these words speak so eloquently to what it took for us to overcome hegemony:

[Quote] Throughout all of the struggles that have afflicted, and still afflict, the existence of the entire species one mysterious fact signals itself to our attention. It is the fact that an invisible chain links all of the members of humanity in a common circle. It seems that in order to prosper and grow human beings must take an interest in one another’s progress and happiness and cultivate those altruistic sentiments which are the greatest achievement of the human heart and mind.

Thank you.



## References:

- Dekoloniale Erinnerungskultur in der Stadt & Museum Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf (2023)  
Kooperationsausstellung in der Villa Oppenheim: „Solidarisiert euch! Schwarzer Widerstand und globaler Antikolonialismus in Berlin, 1919–1933“, now closed (<https://www.villa-oppenheim-berlin.de/solidarisiert-euch>), last visited 20.04.2024
- Hughes, Langston (1921) “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”  
(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers>), last visited 20.04.2024
- Knott, Marie Luise (2022) “370 Riverside Drive, 730 Riverside Drive: Hannah Arendt und Ralph Ellison – 17 Hinweise” (Berlin: Verlag Matthes & Seitz)
- Lorde, Audre (1978) “A Litany for Survival” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival>), last visited 20.04.2024
- Firmin, Joseph-Anténor (1885) “De l'égalité des races humaines”  
([https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/De\\_l%27%C3%A9galit%C3%A9\\_des\\_races\\_humaines](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/De_l%27%C3%A9galit%C3%A9_des_races_humaines)), last visited 20.04.2024
- Otoo, Sharon Dodua (2022) “Drei Sprachen” in: Integrationshaus e.V. und Kunts e.V. (Hrsg.) *Die Baustelle. Aus Konservierung wird Konversation. Guide zur Dauerausstellung des Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museums*, p.60
- Owuor, Yvonne Adhiambo (2020) “Derelict Shards: The Roamings of Colonial Phantoms” Keynote at the International Conference: *Colonialism as Shared History. Past, Present, Future*  
([https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/sharedhistory\\_keynote\\_owuor](https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/sharedhistory_keynote_owuor)), last visited 20.04.2023
- Shire, Warsan (2022) “Home” in: *Bless the Daughter, Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (London: Chatto & Windus), p.8