Gaping Absences: Where is Helvécia?

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In recent years, a public realization about the *longue-durée* (long term) implications of Switzerland's role in colonialism and slavery has unfolded. This article seeks to uproot traces and overgrown paths, forcefully forgotten or, on the contrary, hyper-present for the people that lived through this historical reality. As artist-researcher I revisit the plantation through a series of video works that seek to spatialize and give an image to signifying spaces of the plantation. Guided by the inhabitants of today's Quilombo community Helvécia, we root out such places of memory—the former coffee plantation, the *casa grande*, the slave owner's house, the old cemetery or the slave port—in order to undo the erasure of this chapter from Swiss history and take responsibility for its past.

The historical example of the plantation Helvécia, founded in the beginning of the 19th century, was embedded in a conglomerate of plantations run by several Swiss families as well as some Germans under the name *Colonîa Leopoldina*. Indeed, these Swiss plantation owners were white settlers leaving Switzerland to the so-called *New World* for the purpose of expanding profit on grabbed land by the empire of Brazil. As it is often mentioned, to speak about a purely individual enterprise would not be justified, as the wider colony of which Helvécia was part, was managed, supported, overseen and regulated by a Swiss national consulate, founded as one of the first in Brazil after 1848. Concurrently, this marks a foundational nation-building moment, when Switzerland received its first Federal Constitution under the name of *Confoederatio Helvetica*. Therefore, the state's involvement with colonialism cannot be reduced to private actors or individual companies by any means.

Where is Helvécia? How can the distance of seemingly far-away places be minimized? How can terrains of colonial capitalism be put in relation to the built environment in Switzerland? Frantz Fanon noted that "the colonial world is not only where colonizers go. It is a system that encloses city and suburb, rural and wasteland, and the roads and waterways that provide or are carved to provide transport."[1] Our wealthy Swiss cities are built with considerable capital flows of surplus value extracted in colonial worlds of the 18th and 19th century. "As human and nonhuman worlds were ripped from one place to produce wealth in another," says Elizabeth Povinelli in a precise explanation of how these dynamics in rural areas become vast reservoirs of toxicity.[2]

Switzerland's "colonialism without colonies" [3] just recently scratched on a certain stratum of national historiography. Its colonial entanglements and role as free riders of their imperial European neighbors is more and more scrutinized. I argue that a spatialization of such geo-political places, where capitalist colonial extraction happened, is crucial and necessary. Such a long tradition of invisibilization underneath the *white coat* of neutrality manufactured a positivist self-image. Behind the protective shield of a neutral position, global economic expansion flourished in the last 200 years. A radical recognition of these interconnected spatialities—from the place of colonial extractivism, the place of accumulation, Switzerland itself—is needed.

The consistency of ignorance of an official Switzerland towards its colonial entanglement is remarkable. In 2017, a member of the Swiss Federal Council visited the coastal city Ouidha in Benin, whose port was one of the largest slave ports in the triangular trade. While fulfilling an official state visit, she was locally broadcasted on TV while standing under the monument arch *The Door of No Return* commemorating where countless enslaved Africans where forcefully shipped to the Americas. Obviously emotionally touched by the violent history of this place, she recognized it as a *tragedy*. Nevertheless, she expressed how glad she was that "Switzerland never participated in these histories of slavery nor in colonization."[4]

This deliberately constructed blind spot now slowly comes into view and opens into a wide-reaching spectrum. To tackle this blind field and shed light on neglected historical vistas, the figure of the ghost can be helpful. Sociologist Avery Gordon proposes to consult the ghostly as a political mediator who can revision historical memory. "It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory for the future."[5] To repair the representational mistakes is to repair the traces and bear open the net of connections. Helvécia in Brazil bears in its livelihood a meshwork[6] of such lines of connectedness, as already its own name reveals. This is where landscape comes into play. Landscapes are palimpsests of historical strata that can reveal evidence and cultural memory of the humans and nonhumans that inhabit and shape it.

What role does landscape play in memory processes in post-colonial contexts? During my visit in Helvécia, in the north-eastern state of Bahia in Brazil, I was particularly interested in exploring the links between memory, body and landscape. Applying a methodology based on walking, I tried to discover how Helvécia's inhabitants moved in their well-known environment. Some of the locals led me to relevant places according to their own lived history and the intergenerational memory transmitted by their ancestors, most of whom were enslaved Afro-Brazilians. In the case of widely invisibilized implications of Swiss colonialism, how can the land of this former Swiss colony become a material witness[7] of a conflicting past?

Landscapes do not always reveal their complex histories into the visual realm of its spectator. But as Avery Gordon puts it: "Un-visible things are not necessarily not there,"[8] therefore landscapes can carry within them complex histories, layers of

1) Franz Fanon in: Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Urban Intensions of Geontopower,* e-flux architecture, May 5, 2019. *https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/liquid-utility/259667/the-urban-intensions-of-geontopower/*, last accessed May 10, 2021.
2) Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *ibid*.
3) Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk (ed.), *Postkoloniale Schweiz ohne Kolonien*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefield 2012.
4) *Visite à Ouidah: La Présidente Suisse Doris Leuthard se prononce sur l'histoire de l'esclavage*, Benin Eden TV July 14, 2017, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gMgptOuLLo*, last accessed February 1, 2021.
5) Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters, Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 22.
6) Tim Ingold, *Being Alive Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description,* Routledge, London 2011, 63.
7) Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness, Media, Forensics, Evidence,* MIT Press, Cambridge 2020.
8) Avery Gordon, *op. cit.,* 1997.

Video stills selected from Denise Bertschi's three-channel video installation *Helvécia, Brazil* filmed in the Quilombo community Helvécia in 2017.

transformation of soil, a palimpsest of time and space. They are markers of a human-made evolution over time, a transformation and restructuring of the *scaped land*. The format of video-making is therefore particularly interesting to me, as this time-based medium seems to be able to "push to the surface events that had been spirited away," as the artist Joachim Koester writes. "Everything is there, even if it is concealed."[9]

Most archives I consulted for my research are filled with written documents of the white colonial administration, like consular data of plantation inventories and minute books of the plantocracy, but they widely stay silent on the lived experiences of their exploited laborers. As Saidiya Hartmann emphasizes: "History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror."[10] Thereby it is specifically important to listen to the voices of the communities, and their own historiography through oral history.

During one of our walks, Zé da Paz, an elderly man of Helvécia, drove us with the car out of the village. Passing by some of the geometric monocultures of eucalyptus encircling the village, we stopped at a small side street with some undergrowth. With a determined pace, he approached a robust trunk of a fruit-tree from which big fruits hung, the jacca fruits. This fruit tree was the sign indicating where the *Casa Grande* once stood, the house of the plantation owner. Zé da Paz told me that the owner had been a man from Switzerland, a colonialist who named his coffee plantation *Helvécia*, after (what he believed was) a city in Switzerland.

As an outside observer, I wasn't capable of recognizing the meaning of this seemingly inconspicuous tree at the sideway outside of this Quilombo village in the South of Bahia. The jacca tree became a sign, a sign for a Swiss colonial history, a material-witness deeply inscribed in the cultural memory of its inhabitants. Our companion Danilo, a member of the Quilombo Association, picked up some ceramic fragments from the dusty road next to the tree with some with blue floral drawings on it. Maybe it was from a plate, a vessel? "It's left for us to see, how it used to be," he added. One of the oldest inhabitants, known in the village by the name Balango, remembers: "The house where [the slave owners] lived, it was a big house. A house tall as this, from the ground, a big house like you can't imagine. But it was such a house, my dear, with good wood. When I had to go the house to work, the beams on the ceiling, it was crazy, those beams. All made of very good wood. They were all people from abroad. You know, they would come to Brazil and ended up staying here..." According to other family members, Balango was over 100 years old, which makes probable that his parents were enslaved Africans in the one of the plantations in *Colonîa Leopoldina*. His way of telling the history of Helvécia was fragmented, yet very clear. The memories of places, their way of construction, the social relations and material cultures within the social order of the racial capitalist plantation were clearly signified. He perceived this *Casa Grande* with astonishment, regarding its grandeur and its solid and wealthy materials, for example the good wood of the beams. He also described who the people were that lived in it—people that came from abroad, and that would stay. He spoke of what we might call settler colonialists.

The territory of Helvécia in the south of Bahia should be included as a significant site of Switzerland's global history, a territoriality of responsibility for Switzerland. "The global nature of climate change, capital, toxicity, and discursivity immediately demand that we look elsewhere than where we are standing."[11] While standing on the ground of Helvécia in Brazil, our gaze has to go beyond the local and read the global into this very place. While we follow the trails of production and the trade routes of its produce—be it historically coffee or nowadays eucalyptus—these crops scratch their toxic global nets, leaving *longue-durée* changes to the earth system.

To read the deep strata of this patch of land, which carries in its name the traces of colonial history, this very name also holds the erasure of its pre-colonial conditions. Today, exploitive monoculture of eucalyptus has almost completely replaced the former coffee plantation and the interdependent socio-ecological system of the Atlantic rainforest in the region of Helvécia. The only fragments of the original forest are along the rivers, where the heavy machinery of deforestation cannot reach.

One of the early written reports telling us about this first cut into the eco-system by deforestation, in order to install the first plantations at the beginning of the long 19th century, is written from the perspective of a German colonist and medical doctor; a member of the plantocracy. It provides evidence of a first discontinuity—a drastic loss of bio-diversity and mass extinction—by human modification of the biosphere. Only 4% of the *Mâta Atlântica* still exists today because of the re-emergence of capitalist agriculture, illustrating the effects of capitalist urbanization, the expansionary dynamics of global capital. He describes how "clearing the ground" (meaning the violent deforestation of the indigenous coastal forest *Mâta Atlântica*) was conducted: "With few means and hands, with the help of a few N*, the heavy work of clearing the ground had to be started and carried out. Several times in the beginning the cultivation of the cultivated plants, namely coffee, failed or only small harvests were won." After a hard start of assimilating the coffee plant on this foreign soil, the colony became more and more lucrative. "All the more reason for the present state of the colony to rejoice. It currently consists of 40 plantations where 200 white people and 2,000 N* live."[12]

Deforestation is an erasure of other forms of existence. Environmental historian Jason W. Moore states that "with the rise of capitalism, sooner or later everything returned to the forest. Every decisive commodity sector in early capitalism found its life-blood in the Forest."[13] If we read further in the doctor's description of the colony, the life-blood in the forest not only took away the life and habitat of the more-than-human world, but the life-blood of its human inhabitants, the indigenous peoples of the *Mâta Atlântica*, the now distinct Botokuden. "With the forest knife, all bushes, creepers and other plants on the ground are cut down, and then the trees are felled with the axe. The trees often make an unforeseen turn or twist as they fall, falling to a completely different side than one had expected, and sometimes dragging several of the others along with them. It is therefore easy to understand that many accidents occur during this work, especially when it is done by [Amer-]Indians, who, even though they are particularly well suited for it, are too careless. During the entire duration of my stay, many people were killed in the process." It is remarkable that this text is written in a passive tense: "the plants are cut down."[14] Only at the very end of the passage is it mentioned who actually executed this dangerous work: the indigenous peoples, often betrayed to do it through being paid simple objects like shiny pearls, munition or food.

9) Joachim Koester, *Of Spirits and Empty Spaces*, Mousse Publishing, Milan 2014, p. 102.
10) Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, in "Small Axe", Vol.12, No. 2 (2008), p. 9.
11) Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem of late Liberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2016, p. 13.
12) Carl August Toelsner, *Colonial Leopoldina*, Goettingen, 1860, p. 3.
13) Jason W. Moore, *Madeira, Sugar, and the Conquest of Nature in the "First" Sixteenth Century: Part I: From "Island of Timber" to Sugar Revolution, 1420–1506,* in "Review", Vol. 32, No. 4 (2009), p. 350.
14) Carl August Toelsner, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Because of the unhaltable deforestation done by the colonialists, nature has disappeared, if we understand nature as a spatial view where dynamics of nature happen, independent of humans. Plants have been instrumentalized to serve the appetite of profit. "On the inexhaustibly fertile soil, thrive and are successfully cultivated in the blessed climate of the colony: the coffee tree..." the doctor goes on. Defining nature is a political act. During the Christianization of Western Europe in Medieval times and the elimination of pagan-animism, nature got degraded to the material world, as opposed to the non-material divine world.[15] Nature did not belong to the sacred world anymore, in contrast to polytheistic belief systems and spiritualities. "Replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over [...] every living thing that moveth upon the earth."[16] This passage from the Old Testament was interpreted as the legitimization of exploitation. With nature losing its sacred property, it was solely there for appropriation and exploitation, to serve men. With its peak during *protestant capitalism* (Weber), it is no surprise that the Swiss that left to the so-called *New World* to start plantations like the one of Helvécia were from Protestant cities like Neuchâtel or others.

It is remarkable that Lynn Whites argued as early as the 1950s for a connection between the unique role of religion, especially the Christian one, and its human relation to the natural world. With reference to Christianity as the most anthropocentric religion, Whites states that "a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West."[17] It is therefore no surprise that this suppression of soil and labor by the (Swiss) Protestant planters was going hand in hand with Christianization. Toelsner, the doctor of the colony, described that the 2,000 enslaved people living on the colony were "all baptized, educated as Christians and well kept. Most boys are admitted to learning a craft, the girls are taught in all female works. On the inexhaustibly fertile soil, thrive and are successfully cultivated in the blessed climate of the colony: the coffee tree..." What he meant by *well-kept* in the context of enforced labor and enslaved ways of life including the erasure of their own cultural heritage is left open. That this very same "inexhaustible fertile soil" was soon to be exhausted into a deserted ecological disaster was not yet in his anthropocentric perspective.

In the context of the plantation, what looks like nature cannot be called *nature* anymore. Much more it represents an operationalized landscape,[18] efficiently planned as a monoculture system, geometrically measured and laid out. Plants are instrumentalized as crops. The goal of this meticulous efficiency is productivity of land and soil and its economic benefit, now and then.

The family-run plantations by the Swiss, in a racial capitalist order of the 19th century, are replaced today by multinationals using the fast-growing eucalyptus tree as their business model. These companies create a *nature* beyond life. A nature of death, of life-sucking forces instrumentalizing plants into production machines. Geometrically aligned, they enter the circle of production: monoculture reproduced, growing, while draining the soil and becoming toxified by pesticides—cut down and transported to the harbor for global economy. On a shield at the sideway of a path through the eucalyptus plantation, a billboard prohibiting entrance to these so-called forests, as to protect the animals living in it, reads: "Help protect nature." The owners of the plantation, the multinational Suzano, are tricksters. They adopt the notion of nature, although this here has nothing to do with nature. Their call to 'save' the forest is, rather, a deflecting safety restriction deterring humans from entering their field of production of privatized land.

The multinational Suzano created a strong dependency, not only to their tight growth plan, but also to the local Quilombo community Helvécia. Each infrastructural investment—like installing street signs, building a school or a cultural center in the Quilombo-village Helvécia—is financed by the plantation firm, upholding an infrastructure of dependency in a strong hierarchical power relation that materializes on many levels.

Most of Helvécia's inhabitants work as cheap labor forces locally called *"bóia-frias"* in the all surrounding eucalyptus plantation. One of the founding members of the female-dominated Quilombo characterized these working conditions as neo-colonial and similar to the forced labor of slaves, referring to their ancestors working in the Swiss coffee plantations.

Just 500 meters outside of the village along the main road lies a compound of Suzano's nursery of eucalyptus trees. It is a place of seemingly never-ending production, where the eucalyptus trees are multiplied. It is significant that most of Helvécia's workers for the multination stand at the very beginning of this production cycle: the nursery. The development of these planted forests starts in the nurseries, where the most up-to-date cloning technology is available. According to internal reviews, Suzano's eucalyptus harvest rotation is approximately seven years, a period shorter than in any other region of the world. The eucalyptus tree is a highly genetically modified and sculptured plant, modelled for the highest productivity possible. Helvécia's village inhabitants working for the nursery cut the cloned hybrids with their hands, in a specially developed technique for highest surplus value, a technique the company calls 'assisted growth'. 30 million cloned eucalyptus seedlings a year are produced by the low-wage work of Helvécia's residents, whose income is dependent on the surrounding plantation of 173,000 hectares. Suzano's multination is the owner of 1,250 hectares of eucalyptus plantation in Brazil. This is an unimaginable sum of privatized land, exploited to provide the world's consumerist demand of pulp in the form of packaging, paper and tissues.

I am trying to tie the *longue-durée* connection between Switzerland and Helvécia in Bahia. The Swiss coffee plantocracy, who in the beginning of the 19th century deforested large patches of the *Mâta Atlântica* with the *help* of indigenous peoples. It is remarkable that today, the multinational Suzano's main headquarter for foreign sales markets is based in Switzerland. Its CEO was trained in a Swiss business school and is an active member of another heavy Swiss construction materials multinational. Nowadays, nationalities seem to play a less important role in this entangled network of a globalized capitalist extraction economy. Outside of Brazil, Switzerland is the main location for Suzano's operating sales, next to the U.S., Argentina and the Cayman Islands, a British Overseas Territory in the western Caribbean Sea and known as a major offshore financial haven.

With the example of the land on which Helvécia lies, we can unfold hundreds of years of old entanglements of nature and capitalism to still the appetite of the trader. "Terror makes nature its ally," as Michael Taussig accurately formulates.[19]

15) Frédéric Ducarme, Denis Couvet, *What does 'nature' mean?*, Humanities & Social Sciences Communications January 31, 2020, *https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0390-y*, last accessed February 15, 2021.
16) Genesis 1, 28, King James Bible.
17) Lynn White Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, in "Science", Vol. 155 (1967), p. 53.
18) Neil Brenner & Christian Schmid, *Towards a new epistemology of the urban?*, in "City", Vol. 19 (2015), p. 174.
19) Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study In Terror and Healing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1987 , p. 6.

However, despite the repressive manifestation of this system, it is important to highlight the agency and resistance that characterizes the Quilombo community of Helvécia. In contrast to the *longue-durée* of exploitation stands the *longue-durée* of rebellion of Afro-Brazilians through the formation of Quilombo communities, the most common form of slave resistance in Bahia since the 16th century. Maroon settlements were built by fugitive slaves who fled on the fringes of the plantations. The ignorance and suppression of the cultural and cosmological heritage African enslaved people brought with them over the Atlantic to Brazil was the ground of the trauma and revolts of black Africans in Brazil.

As I am reading from the plantation records of the former plantation Helvécia, the ratio of white colonists to enslaved Africans was about 1:10. The average plantation in *Colonîa Leopoldina* counted around 5 white to 50 Black people, with a total of 200 whites to 2,000 slaves. In such an oppressive slave labor plantation system, security measures were put in place in order to try to gain control over the enslaved workers, including torture and violence against the revolting slaves. What Cedric Robinson calls "the specter of punishment"[20] was part of this institutionalized brutality. To this day, the trauma of this punishments is highly present in the long memory of Helvécia's community. Furthermore, these traumatic memories are spatial. They are inscribed to very specific places in the village and in its landscape, where violence against slaves presumably happened. Memories strongly linked to signifiers in the landscape are distributed in the form of rumors and local historical experience. Luise White argues that rumors, in colonial contexts, "can be a source for local history that reveals the passionate contradictions and anxieties of specific places with specific histories."[21] Such rumors make apparent local concerns, however fragmented. The oral histories are testimonies of a terrain of memory.

During conversations with descendants of enslaved people in Helvécia, we were told many times different versions of how the colonists killed and burnt babies of their ancestors. These brutal testimonies are in stark contrast with the positivist narrative which suggests that Swiss slave owners were *better* colonizers, morally superior to their counterparts. Thus, it becomes important to differentiate who tells which story in order to legitimize what. The latter presumption is an interpretation of Itaberaba Sulz, a descendent of a Swiss colonist in Helvécia who owns an important document, a book with the minutes of the planters, with which his forefathers met regularly to regulate the plantations. Sulz argues that the word *escravo* ('slave' in Portuguese) was never used in the book, and the word *negro* ('black person' in Portuguese) was instead. Therefore, the Swiss plantation owners mustn't have seen those they enslaved as slaves. Again, this narrative stands in stark contrast with the embodied generational oral history of the Afro-Brazilians in Helvécia. To give an example, the Quilombo leader Titinha and women's group initiator, who was the main activist behind organizing the legal fight for recognizing Helvécia as a Quilombo, invited us to her house for a refreshment and some fruits. Sitting on the veranda, she moved towards the yard and pointed on some glade between the trees in her garden. Titinha explained that this was the space where the *tronco* was placed, the trunk, where the enslaved were punished.

The simultaneity of remembered time and present time was demonstrated in her words. The place of violence of forced labor in enslaved conditions is constantly remembered, as it is in the backyard of the family house. For an external visitor, no visible signs can be read in the landscape of this rural village. The villagers include these *imagined* memorized places of violence and torture quite intimately in their way of life in the village. The relationship with this landscape is at the heart of the memory process.

This article emerges out of Denise Bertschi's ongoing doctoral research at EPFL Lausanne and HEAD Genève.
https://www.epfl.ch/labs/lapis/en/research/helvecia-brazil/

20) Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism, The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,* The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1983, p. 123.
21) Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires, Rumor and History in Colonial Africa,* University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 71.