

Article

## **Wandering the In-Between, Where All Contradictions Concur. Confrontations with Anti-Indigenous Racism, White Colonial Pop Cultures, and Performance Traditions in the German-Speaking Context**

Verena Melgarejo Weinandt  
Central European University, Vienna

Suza Husse  
Independent researcher; district\*school without center, Berlin

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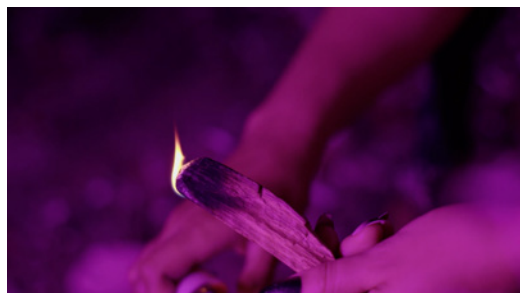
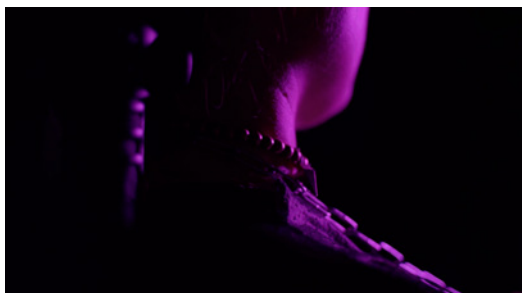
## Wandering the In-Between, Where All Contradictions Concur. Confrontations with Anti-Indigenous Racism, White Colonial Pop Cultures, and Performance Traditions in the German-Speaking Context<sup>1</sup>

Verena Melgarejo Weinandt and Suza Husse

This article explores the role of performance as a colonial as well as anti-colonial cultural tool. It looks at how popular performance culture is used to create colonial imaginaries about Indigenous people in the German-speaking context, and how we can understand these imaginaries in connection to the realities and repetitions of colonial violence in the present. Based on their practice of working, thinking, and writing together as artists, researchers, and cultural workers, the two authors interlace biographically situated perspectives on the presence of anti-Indigenous racism and its rootedness in German society through colonial pop cultures and white performance traditions. The article is inspired by Melgarejo Weinandt's performative alter ego Pocahunter engaged in a performance and multimedia practice countering colonial stereotyping and anti-Indigenous racism. Connecting to realities in the postsocialist East, where Husse grew up, cultural practices around 'Indianthusiasm' spectacles, and museum cultures connected to the colonial writer Karl May, we think about ways to seek transformative modes of repair; in doing so, we look at different cultural expressions, artistic counter-practice, possible theoretical framings, modes of activism.

**Keywords:** anti-Indigenous racism, anti-colonial arts and activism, colonial pop culture, decolonial and queer imaginaries, Indianthusiasm, Indigenous world-making, Karl May, Matoaka, performance art, Pocahontas, postsocialism

Figures 1–2. Stills from the video performance *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, 2022. All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.



**Verena:** In my performative video *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness* (2022), my alter ego Pocahunter walks through an undefined area with bushes and small trees at night. City lights can be seen in the background. She wanders through this landscape without a destination. She appears, is visible, and yet also remains hidden and unrecognized. She prepares herself, sorts her necklaces, ties her shoes, lights palo santo. A text is whispered:

I am your body, your soul, your mind  
we are one, and also not

now you are here  
you were always

what can I call you?  
zombie-Pocahunter  
nightmare-Pocahunter  
wandering ancestor  
with wandering names

you have found rest in the underworld  
are haunting people in their dreams  
the head of John Smith is dangling on your belt

you wander through all times  
not belonging to the past, the present, nor the future  
still, you inhabit all of them at once

wandering the in-between, the liminal space  
where all contradictions concur  
you move in constant transformation!

This performance is an invocation of Pocahunter describing her relationship to my personal identity and the story of Matoaka, the Powhatan woman from present-day Virginia, USA, on whom the fictional *Pocahontas* stories are based. What remains at the end of the video is the smoke of palo santo that drifts across the images. My voice whispers into and through this darkness as a gesture of transcendence.

The video is a ritual and marks the beginning of a video series that follows this invocation of Pocahunter as a performative being. The video is also a gesture, a movement, and a form of wandering towards a space-time-body that exists outside my reality and the present; it is an invocation of this alter ego, an attempt to communicate, and at the same time an expression of the impossibility of communication.

Suza, you and I have been exchanging ideas, collaborating, and interweaving our practices, thoughts, and stories for several years

now through curating, exhibitions, workshops, publications, and events of all kinds. While we have been sharing our thoughts and emotions on the never-ending presence of anti-Indigenous racism and its rootedness in German society for years, it was not until our collaboration for the online archive *re.act.feminism* (2008) and its presentation at Manifesta 14 in 2022, as well as the production of the performance video *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, that we had finally found a frame that allowed us to start our collaboration on a topic that we felt—and still feel today—needs more attention and general awareness. Let us start from here.

**Suza:** Next to working together in relation to Gloria E. Anzaldúa's legacy and its significance for queer, migrant, intersectional creating of worlds, making art, and rethinking political and cultural organizing that has connected us since 2017, your performative alter ego Pocahunter has become an important bridge between us. It has been inspiring to witness how, beginning in 2014, Pocahunter has appeared and disappeared again and again in different times and spaces, sometimes conjuring up nightmares against the colonial imagination, and sometimes braiding different dimensions into threads of connectedness. I think it was around 2021 that Pocahunter began to bring about an exchange between us that connects our individual, biographically different, and shared confrontations with coloniality, racism, white colonial pop cultures, and performance traditions in the German-speaking and multilingual context. In 2022, I was collaborating with the online performance archive *re.act.feminism#3*, founded by Bettina Knaup and Beatrice Stammer, to create a digital format for new artist commissions in interaction with works from the archive. This became *revenge ~ avatars and manyness\**, which was co-created by you, Oreet Ashery, and myself, and which referenced the works of Teresa María Díaz Nerio and Bartolina XiXa (Ashery, Husse, and Melgarejo Weinandt 2022). The video performance *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)* was your contribution. Here, Pocahunter emerges from the in-between worlds, perhaps more like a movement that manifests in a body—I mean gestures and imaginaries that rise from dissident ecologies and political underworlds. This leads me to ask: from where did she emerge for you, and how did she arrive to you?

**Verena:** One of the most important moments in the development of Pocahunter, and one that has become particularly significant in retrospect, was when the Disney film *Pocahontas* was released in Germany. That was in 1995, and I was nine years old. At that time, a whole generation was consuming the same television and cinema programs; therefore, they played a major role in determining our cultural influences. These shared references created a bond between people of my generation and a shared sense of identity. It's interesting how some events can take on a completely different meaning at a later point in life. With a German mother and a father from Bolivia, my family was not one of the strongly present migrant groups in Berlin at that time, but

we were no exception in terms of families with a history of migration in Berlin-Kreuzberg, living in this district which was predominantly migrant and working class. This meant that experiences of othering, racism, and xenophobia, even if we weren't familiar with the definitions of those concepts at that time, were not uncommon due to this diverse demography. White people would often assume that as People of Color we couldn't be German. My appearance often puzzled people, as they couldn't clearly place me in their existing catalog of ethnic stereotypes. But the release of the Disney movie *Pocahontas* drastically changed that experience. I was suddenly confronted with the excitement of people who had the impression that seeing me meant having a living version of *Pocahontas* in front of them. Within my social environment, this film revitalized centuries-old colonial, racist, exoticizing, and sexualizing stereotypical images of and narratives about Indigenous people. They were updated and made accessible to a whole generation, to my generation. I remember being asked in everyday life—at a bus stop, on the subway, and so on—about my resemblance to this figure. This comparison became a recurring moment that was repeatedly (re)inscribed throughout my whole life. Later, I was able to contextualize these experiences as just one out of many repetitions and updates of colonial imaginaries through the cultural productions of the past centuries that reproduce mechanisms of colonial violence towards Indigenous people. It is hard to grasp or even imagine this forever unsolved 'problem' in all the violent dimensions, outputs, and consequences of this never-ending repetition of narratives and images. It is their ability to create racism and sexism through stories that are completely invented and used to generate financial profit by exploiting Indigenous peoples as well as their histories and cultures but are presented as 'innocent' novels and children's books that have remained intact as a mechanism over centuries. And this is where my performance figure Pocahunter comes in. Through this fictional alter ego, I found a channel which allowed me to explore different layers, dimensions, and meanings of my experience. It gave me an outlet to express how this experience has altered my self-image and changed my search for gestures and images that would heal it. The emphasis here lies on this search, on the process of creating those gestures and images rather than providing or finding clear answers. It also gave me an output for my research on the significance and impact of fictions and fantasies about Indigenous people, especially in the German-speaking world, allowing me to make visible how they unfold themselves, shape our present, and reproduce centuries-old colonial mechanisms of violence today.

As a trained photographer, I have been *searching* for images since I started studying and creating art. Making videos feels like an extension of this process: exploring images beyond violent stereotypes while using my fictional alter ego to create new imaginaries for myself and others. This is indeed a 'hopeful' endeavor, as I am thus expressing how creative processes and aesthetics can create change and transformation beyond rational comprehension (at least my own). This is related to Gloria E. Anzaldúa's (2015) understanding of the relation between 'self-knowledge and creative work'

and 'creativity as a liberation impulse' practiced by what she calls 'the artist as chamana' (pp. 40, 39). I believe that expressing this ability allows us to image different futures, of ourselves as humans and of our relation to all beings.

**Suza:** For me, your work, and Pocahunter in particular, is an impulse to find ways to unlearn the colonial fictions with which I have grown up as a white kid and teenager in East Germany, and a language for the dissonances they still trigger today. Pocahunter reminded me that I was born into a time of state-sanctioned revival of the colonial writer Karl May. His revival in the early 1980s renormalized performative and narrative traditions of white German superiority that had been significantly influenced by his work, including the cultural appropriation of Indigenous imagery and traditions. In 1983, the GDR head of state, Erich Honecker, personally advocated for the 'Indianer Museum' in Dresden Radebeul to be reconnected more explicitly with the figure of Karl May, whose collection the museum was based on and to whose legacy it was dedicated, but whose name it could not bear because, since the founding of the GDR and until that moment, Karl May had been officially condemned as an imperialist author. In 1956, the East German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* described May, a writer that was favored and widely popularized by the Nazis, as 'a harbinger of fascist sentiment. His super-German supermen... inculcated the youth with an unhumanistic [*unhumanistisch*], barbaric attitude' (Bronnen 1956, cit. in von Borries and Fischer 2008: 19). While it is interesting that the 'barbaric' is recognized in this text as an attribute of imperial masculinity and the 'super-German' as a brutalization of the world, only a decade later May's 'ghosts'—the role models his characters provided—began to reappear in GDR cinema and TV culture with only slightly changed signifiers. As a child in the 1980s and 1990s, I watched East German cinematic renderings of Indianist novels, now written by socialist authors, as well as West German film adaptations of May's books. The homoerotic brotherhood between the good white proto-soldier who brings 'peace' and 'humanity,' and the 'noble savage' who has been 'educated'/'civilized' through Christian contact, riding together towards the horizon of a 'new world,' became part of my imagination.

I don't remember visiting the Karl May Museum when I was a child. My family didn't read May's novels at home, but to dress up as 'cowboys' and 'Indians,' or as May's characters Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, was definitely a thing in kindergarten. In 1984, when I was two years old, the Karl May plays were returned to the program of the open-air theater Felsenbühne Rathen near Dresden, which had been founded in 1938 by the National Socialists to host their Karl May Festivals. In the time and space of my growing up, all these performances of the colonial constituted an important part of the repertoire of late socialist and then postsocialist youth culture. They were as present in the everyday experiences of playing and rehearsing social roles and structures as was being part of the young pioneers, visiting dinosaur parks, playing on building sites, and, later, finding oneself on different sides of the political rifts that ran through teenage belonging, with its divisions into punks, *Faschos* (neo-fascist skinheads), and ravers.<sup>2</sup>

**Verena:** Pocahunter deals with this phenomenon that Hartmut Lutz (2002) calls *Indianthusiasm*, which is expressed in many of the experiences that you mentioned as well as in German cultural practices and phenomena more broadly. Lutz (2002) describes Indianthusiasm as a German version of 'yearning for all things Indian, a fascination with American Indians, a romanticizing about a supposed Indian essence' (p. 168). While this yearning exists in many other cultural contexts, too, Lutz (2002, 2020) and Susanne Zantop (1997, 2002) have studied how this stereotype has impacted German culture and nation-building since the proclamation of the German empire in 1871. Today, in the German-speaking context, there is a significant lack of consciousness about the historical role that Indigenous stereotypes have played in the making of a German identity that had yet to be constructed with the foundation of the unified German state in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

After 1871, Indigenous stereotypes were used to create a desired fictional identity with which Germans could identify, an image of a positively connotated 'other,' which was later used by the Nazis as a positively connotated stereotype that served as a counter-image to antisemitic stereotypes (Lutz 2002: 179–180). So, the stereotype of the Indigenous other became a fantasy which was used to create a German national identity. It was loaded with images, character traits, and ideas of connection to the own community and to nature, which served as a mirror for the projections of what German national identity aspired to be. Cultural productions and colonial imaginations such as May's novels played a vital part in presenting whatever Germans imagined themselves to be. They also addressed a 'lack' in terms of colonial identity and colonial empire at a moment in history when Germany was still hoping to play an important role in colonial imperialism (Zantop 1997: 6). Colonial fantasies served as the ground for the realization of colonial endeavors: 'imaginary colonialism' (Zantop 1997: 9).

**Suza:** Your analysis of how an imagined Indigeneity was crucial to the project of constructing Germanness, or a collective German identity, has helped me better understand what happened during the so-called transition years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a 'reunified' German identity celebrated itself as white, capitalist, and Christian. The continuation and revival of colonial imaginaries went hand in hand with the intensification of racist violence and neofascist organization. The recourse to colonial fictions such as the ones popularized by May and the German *Indianthusiasm* culture lent these movements more than cultural legitimacy. It gave them tools. May's writing is inconceivable without the collective practice of dressing up as the colonized, the colonial other, which he cultivated and celebrated in his house and gardens that host the museum today.

The revitalization of stereotypical images and narratives of Indigenous people with Disney's Pocahontas that you described earlier activated this pre-existing imaginary, pushed it to re-emerge and made it much more popular again. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the *Pocahontas* craze reached us at a time when post/migrant and

BIPoC feminist struggles and anti-racist cultural, social, and political work in Germany had been building up for decades and was very virulent. In fact, Encarnación Guitiérrez Rodríguez and Pinar Tuzcu (2021) state that the 1980s and 1990s mark a peak of feminist political self-organization of migrants, Black people, People of Colour, Sinti:zze and Romn:ja, of exiled and Jewish women, lesbians and queers. In this light, I think your Pocahunter character can be seen as a manifestation that is part of these forms of organized activism, resistance cultures, and world-making, and their anti-colonial counter-proposals, in which you have been actively involved for many years.

**Verena:** I agree that we have to think of our activities and art-making as part of a larger movement that has shaped what and how we articulate in different formats, images, words, and movements today.<sup>4</sup> Indianthusiasm has been analyzed and criticized by the film *Forget Winnetou* (2018), directed by the Chiricahua Apache/Cherokee writer, game developer, educator, psychologist, and filmmaker Red Haircrow.<sup>5</sup> This movie creates a space for Indigenous/Native people to address and discuss how Indianthusiasm unfolds many different forms of oppression and perpetuates structures of colonialism in Germany today. In my opinion, it should be part of every school curriculum in Germany.

**Suza:** While *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series, Part I)* was in the making for *revenge ~ avatars and manyness\*/ re.act.feminism#3*, Oreet Ashery, you and I talked a lot about revenge and the unsettling of colonial time. We made a zine out of these conversations (Ashery, Husse and Melgarejo Weinandt 2022). Thinking with both your and Oreet's practices at the time led me to reflect on revenge as a queer and anticolonial possibility, a form of hope maybe, that addresses or reaches through the past and is morally ambiguous.

Pocahunter's revenge—and practice of enacting hope in which you engage through her—seems to be an interweaving of dissonances. It activates connections made of living fragments that fan out their rupture bodies like indissoluble shadows: frequencies; Pocahunter-Verena-Matoaka; tectonic trembling through loops of time. In her entangling of times and her return to Matoaka, the actual Powhatan ancestor, Pocahunter unsettles *Pocahontas* and blows up the wrong, violent vessel that this colonial fiction has created, but which nevertheless transports fragments of this spirit/ancestor. When these become space-time bodies again via Pocahunter, as you say, *Pocahontas* is *dismembered* by her, as we could call this recomposing form of remembering according to Gloria E. Anzaldúa.

It seems to me that this *dismembering* and interweaving of dissonances have shaped your approach to Matoaka over the years and allowed you to call on her as an ancestor that remains inscribed even in her exoticized representation, to reinforce that which is resistant—present/absent in the colonial archive as a glitch, as a rupture. This interweaving within the Matoaka-Verena-Pocahunter triangle also seems to carry some

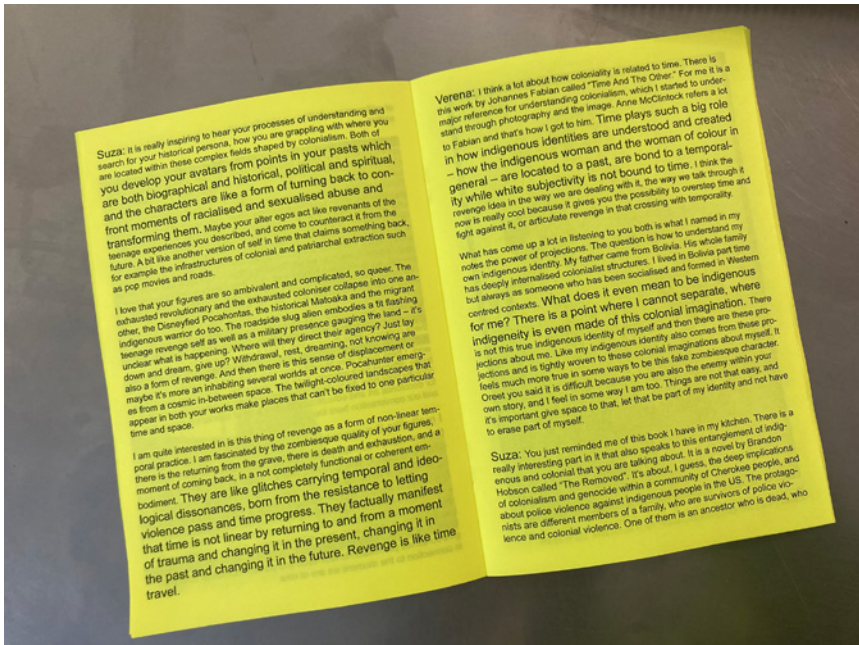
of the flickering of what Indigeneity means. How would you say this triangle has changed since you started working more intensely with the history of Matoaka? In her latest appearance, Pocahunter literally makes braids connecting her to and through different dimensions.

**Verena:** Your question is not easy to answer, and at the same time it is one of the central questions that inspires me in my work and engagement with Pocahunter. You are already including a definition here that goes beyond a colonial definition of linear temporality and spatial thinking, because you also include Matoaka<sup>6</sup> in the triangle, a person who lived many hundreds of years ago and with whom I have no direct relationship. So, what is my relationship with Matoaka?

The documents and publications from the archives that were used to reconstruct her biography consist exclusively of reports, letters, and publications written from the perspective of English people who were involved in the colonization of the land, people, and all beings of what is today Virginia, USA. These archived documents bear witness to and describe various moments in Matoaka's life: her abduction and hostage-taking in present-day Virginia, her marriage to the English tobacco farmer John Rolfe, her baptism and change of name to Rebecca, her journey to England, the birth of her son Thomas Rolfe, her death on a ship on the Thames, and her burial in Gravesend, a small town outside of London. But her own words about all of this, her perspective and descriptions and hints to gestures, wishes, denials, refusals, and strategies of survival are not in the archives. Saidiya Hartman (2008) famously describes the dilemma of missing voices in archives when she writes: 'The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed' (p. 8).

Matoaka's story is hardly known by all of those who have seen and know the Disney movie *Pocahontas* based on her life. What is known through the Disney movie, however, is a story about Matoaka which is very unlikely to be true and which was told by one of the colonizers of Jamestown. John Smith first published this story in 1624 in his *Generall Historie*, in which he describes his rescue by Matoaka. He published this story at a time when it was politically convenient; many years after this alleged rescue (1607–1609) are said to have taken place. John Smith was able to promote this story very well, as we would put it today. The illustrations for his publication were executed by Robert Vaughan, a successful engraver who worked in the style of Theodor de Bry. Helen C. Rountree (2005) speaks of Smith's 'self-aggrandizing accounts' (p. 2) and how he exaggerates not only his own importance of the then 11-year-old Matoaka for the encounter between John Smith and the Powhatan people, making his story less credible. But his narrative continued to circulate.

In 1805, Matoaka became the main character of the novel *The Settlers of Virginia* by John Davis. This love story became a bestseller of the early European novels and an influential book during the emergence of a bourgeois reading culture for women (Theweleit 1999: 45). I would therefore



Figures 3–5. Views of Oreet Ashery, Suza Husse and Verena Melgarejo Weinand’s zine *She Creates Nightmares against Colonial Desires. revenge ~ avatars and manyness \* Conversations*, published as part of *re.act. feminism* #3, 2022. Photographs by Suza Husse, 2025. All rights reserved, courtesy of the photographer.

add a fourth position to your triangle: the fictional projection of Matoaka, known mostly as *Pocahontas*. This figure represents the centuries-long circulation of fiction that is constantly renewed and remains intact despite all changes in society, technology, visual language, communication, media, and narrative styles. Matoaka was taken up again to adapt her story in media-effective forms and narratives to the respective time, the existing social and cultural codes and norms, in order to revive the same story time and time again: an Indigenous woman who not only falls in love with her colonizer, but even saves him from death, protects him from her own family, and ultimately identifies with his culture and beliefs.

Moreover, I would give your triangle a circular movement; not a linear movement from A to B, but a constant back and forth, a reference back to the past and a carrying forward into the present. Through Pocahunter's gestures, I want to express the impact and manifestation of these stories and fictions which travel into the present and future, suspending temporal and spatial boundaries. Pocahunter asks how these fantasies circulate in the German-speaking context and what policies are formed with and through them, for 'colonial fantasies provide access to the "political unconscious" of a nation, to the desires, dreams, and myths that inform public discourse and (can) propel collective political action' (Zantop 1997: 4). She asks how these fantasies were assimilated in order to create a German national identity and how they then manifest themselves as part of the Germans' 'collective mentality' (Zantop 1997: 4). Here, we see a discrepancy that is systematic when it comes to Indigenous peoples. The ubiquity of fictional imaginings, when compared to reality, to representations of real Indigenous people. These endless fictions speak about and reflect those who produce them, from whom they come, not the other way around. And then they live on as ideas and shape reality through those who consume them. Pocahunter wanders between these realms, the imaginative and the real, expressing the need for reorganizing and transforming the relationship to colonial imaginaries that shape us collectively and individually.

My alter ego Pocahunter addresses this imaginary dimension and its power to influence and shape reality. She explores how these fantasies are inscribed in my—our—bodies and the way we project ourselves. Through her, I can articulate and externalize forms of violence that I, like many others, have internalized and normalized, and find methods to transform those influences again. I ask myself, after Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019): 'What does it take to attend to the recurrent moment of original violence?', understanding that '[t]o attend is to seek different transformative modes of repair of which restitution and reparations are possible options' (p. 8). Suza, what other references can you think of concerning frameworks, concepts, and cosmovisions that allow for transformative modes of repair by altering the way we think about and understand these moments of violence?

**Suza:** The way you connect Pocahunter to Azoulay resonates with what fascinates me about the idea of revenge as a form of time travel and nonlinear

memory, both of which could also be described as states of dreaming. Another powerful reference, and one that already has been part of our conversations is *Repensando el apocalipsis. Manifiesto Indígena Antifuturista*, a manifesto which was published in 2020 during the COVID lockdowns.

In it, the motif of dreaming appears as an expression of ancestral connections and the crossing of time:

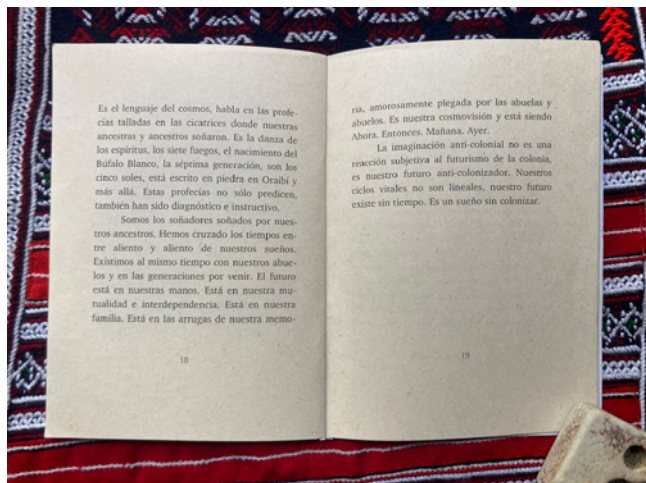
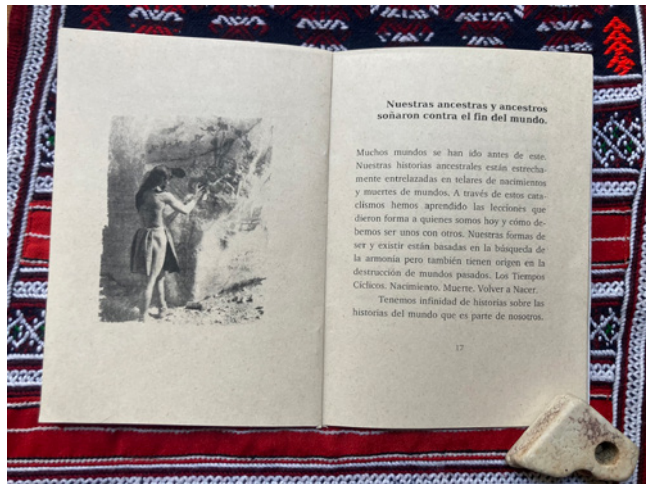
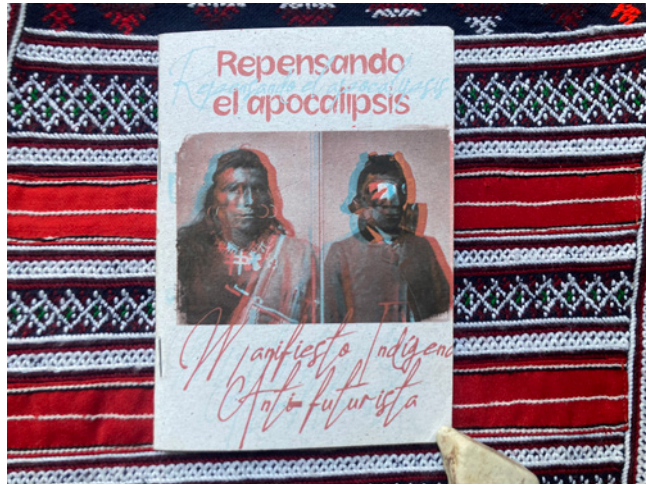
'Our ancestors dreamt against the end of the world.

Many worlds have gone before this one. Our traditional histories are tightly woven with the fabric of the birthing and ending of worlds. [...]

We have an unknowing of histories upon histories of the world that is part of us. It is the language of the cosmos, it speaks in prophecies long carved in the scars where our ancestors dreamed. It is the ghostdance, the seven fires, the birth of the White Buffalo, the seventh generation, it is the five suns, it is written in stone near Oraibi, and beyond. These prophecies are not just predictive, they have also been diagnostic and instructive.

We are the dreamers dreamt by our ancestors. We have traversed all time between the breaths of our dreams. We exist at once with our ancestors and unborn generations. Our future is held in our hands. It is our mutuality and interdependence. It is our relative. It is in the creases of our memories, folded gently by our ancestors. It is our collective Dreamtime, and it is Now. Then. Tomorrow. Yesterday. The anti-colonial imagination isn't a subjective reaction to colonial futurisms, it is anti-settler future. Our life cycles are not linear, our future exists without time. It is a dream, uncolonized.<sup>7</sup>

In the two video performances *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)* from 2022 and *Braiding Renewal (Pocahunter Series)* from 2023, Pocahunter is invoked as both a dream and a dreamer. Pocahunter dreams of Matoaka, if we want to describe the invocation and re-embodiment as a kind of dreaming. At the same time, with the *Manifiesto Indígena Antifuturista*, Matoaka can be seen as an ancestor who dreamed of you and Pocahunter 'against the end of the world.' These kinds of dreams inscribe forms of survival, resistance, repair, or healing, that also inform the work of speculative historiography, the creation of counter-memory, and the material-spiritual weaving of connections that you do in your art. We read a part of the *Manifiesto* when you and I had a public conversation inspired by your two works mentioned above, as part of the program 'Tonight the city + + is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +,' which I co-organized within the collective anticolonial feminist infrastructure 'When the Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession' in June 2024.<sup>8</sup> 'Tectonic Bones Radio' brought together descendants, activists, artists, lawyers, cultural workers, and healers to engage speculatively with the earthquakes and tectonic shifts caused by Indigenous ancestors and 'ancestral remains' held against their will in German institutions and by the continued struggles against colonial injustices. Engaging with their presence as a constellation of epicenters, their tremors moving deep in time allowed for a different kind of speaking both through biographical, historical, and earthly speculation. Many people spoke about moments in their childhood as political seismographic events and thus manifested counter-histories



Figures 6–8. *Repensando el apocalipsis*. *Manifiesto Indígena Antifuturista*, 2020. Photographs by Suza Husse, 2025. All rights reserved, courtesy of the photographer.

and counter-memories that live in each of our bodies, in transgenerational experiences, and in the ecologies that we are part of. To connect these speculative tectonics and ancestral dreaming of futures, I want to ask about your child self: was Pocahunter perhaps also a dream of this child self, a dream to counteract pocahontization? Can you remember what forms of resistance you found and invented as a child?

**Verena:** I find it hard to remember what the reactions and emotions to the Pocahontas projections I experienced in my childhood were. Maybe it also doesn't matter if Pocahunter already existed back then as a fantasy—because she exists now, she has created that connection to my childhood experiences. This goes back to what we discussed earlier: the relationships between past, present, and future are to be made multiple and circular. I am able to connect to my childhood by creating this performance, which at the same time is directed towards the future. Pocahunter creates a connection to my childhood experiences beyond my rational understanding, and she is able to heal parts of what is still present from my childhood within me today in ways that are beyond what I can express in words. And although resistance is a very important part of Pocahunter's strategy, I wouldn't limit her actions to that. Or you could say that Pocahunter's resistance is not only directed towards things and people outside, but it also tries to move inward, into imaginaries and fantasies of myself, and explores how they are connected, and how this connection can be transformed in a collective manner. This doesn't mean that she doesn't acknowledge violence, but Pocahunter's approach is not as clearly directed toward binaries such as 'me vs. them,' 'inside vs. outside,' or 'good vs. bad.' Pocahunter's methods and strategies are also very momentary and can change. This constant transformation is what she is about. I don't think I have a direct answer to your question. While Pocahunter does confront violence, she incorporates this 'enemy' also into her braid, which is then, together with all the other parts of the braids, transformed into something else. The visual description and the practice of that performance *Braiding Renewal* describes my conceptual approach better than I am able to put in words, is what I sense here.

Inspired by the manifesto to which you are referring, I developed the performance *Braiding Renewal* within a two-year collective exhibition project.<sup>9</sup> This manifesto was actually the starting point of the whole project and the first text we had discussed collectively. For my performance video for this exhibition, I chose braiding as the central gesture. I went to a river, a place that I visit regularly because it gives me a lot of energy—after visiting it for many years now, I feel very connected to that place. I braided black textile braids on site, a symbol and element that I have been working with for a long time in my artistic practice. I see the braids not only as a reference to the hair and braids of my Indigenous ancestors but to hair in general, as a manifestation of how we all constantly change throughout our lives. It is a physical manifestation of our constant transformation. Braiding as an activity gives the possibility to bring different strands—elements, energies,



Figures 9–10: Stills from the video performance *Braiding Renewal (Pocahunter Series)*, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, 2023. All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.

and stories—together and separate them again. Although the individual strands of the braid form a unit, they also remain separate from each other. I am interested in this visible difference, this continuation of separation within the commonality as a concept, for it allows me to think about our connections and identity formations. The activity of braiding, of connecting and separating again, of the entanglement of all things and beings while at the same time being apart.<sup>10</sup> The performance has an intuitive character and does not follow a linear narrative but tries to convey a process, a capacity for transformation, and the possibility of creating change and healing, all of which I understand as part of the meaning of ‘hope.’ In the video where I braid, I put on a cape made of braids, and I use the textile braids to connect with the environment, especially with the trees. Then, I go into the water and wash the braids. The cape embodies the heaviness and burden of creating these connections, the burden of history that we carry on our shoulders, and the work that is implied for bringing about change. To feel this burden, but also to share it, to transform it, and finally to let go, to transfer the work and the process to another element, so that it can continue on its path, is the conclusion but at the same time the beginning of a process, which again refers to a cyclical understanding of time.

**Suza:** This weaving and loosening of connections as well as the burden of history that you are talking about remind me of what the Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato (2021) describes as *contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*, translated into English as 'counter-pedagogies of cruelty.' She talks about regaining connections, empathy, and reciprocity that create community in defiance of the monocultural forces of our time. The letting go that you are talking about is such a valid way of dealing with colonial relationships, patterns, and architectures, but it doesn't really appear in her work. When we visited the Karl May Museum in Dresden together in March 2024, we talked a lot about what it would mean to engage with this place, which, even though it also feels almost banal and peripheral, remains an epicenter of German colonial fiction. I find Segato's (2021) definition of 'pedagogies of cruelty' very apt for what is on display there. With 'pedagogies of cruelty,' she refers to actions and practices that teach and program people to transform that which is alive and its very vitality into *things*. For example, she talks about how colonial capitalism resignified lands that were multitudes of communal rootedness, that were alive with histories into landscapes of extraction. According to Segato (2021), the pedagogy of cruelty is an education in something that goes way beyond murder, for 'it teaches a deritualized murdering, a death that leaves remains, if at all, in place of the dead' (p. 13, trans. by Suza Husse).

The Karl May Museum is an example of what Segato describes as a fixing, stopping, arresting of what is alive and of time, a place where that which flows uncontrollably is brought into an immovable state; a place where a society learns to get used to the 'spectacle of cruelty.' It is not the cultural, political, ecological, and spiritual realities of Indigenous societies that one can learn about here, but rather endless fictions (in your words, Verena) that speak and reflect those who produce them. It is a museum of white colonial and patriarchal cultures of dispossession and appropriation of aliveness, a museum of German *Indianthusiasm*, and of the mythmaking of white masculinity. But that is not how it communicates itself. It does not say, visit and study a culture of cruelty that is at the basis of historical and contemporary German identity.

There still is a significant collection of ancestral remains of Indigenous people from North America in the Karl May Museum that have been removed from the exhibition display only in recent years. To this day, many public and private collections and storages in Germany hold ancestral remains of people who were murdered and/or deported to Germany in the context of colonialism and colonial genocide; they are held in dehumanizing conditions and against their consent or the consent of their descendants. According to the recent *Scientific Report on the Inventory of Human Remains from Colonial Contexts in Berlin*, in the geographical area of Berlin, where I live, there are at least 13,500 bodies or body parts of colonized ancestors from different parts of Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas, which in many cases continue to be used for white scientific research and education (Decolonize Berlin e.V. 2022).

Verena, you often talk about how the colonial fictions around Indigeneity are based on an imaginary of Indigenous peoples that is stuck

in the past, on an imaginary of Indigenous life that ended with modernity, a genocide, or an apocalypse that had been total. Perversely, to this day and against better knowledge, this imaginary legitimizes both the collection and 'conservation' of cultures that are presumed to be dead or in the process of being murdered during the colonial occupation and their *Indianthusiast* embodiment. In fact, this fascination and embodiment remains exclusively focused on a particular time and space—the Indigenous societies from North American geographies in the 19th century. The collection of the Karl May Museum does the same, confirming Segato's point about an aliveness fixated in death, an arrest of time.

**Verena:** I agree that Segato is helpful for understanding the Karl May Museum in the way it expresses and perpetuates a form of violence that is rendered 'invisible' or 'hidden' behind all the fiction—among other things, behind the fictional Apache character Winnetou from Karl May's stories and behind the author himself, who is celebrated as a 'bad guy' and 'adventurer' and who was imprisoned for stealing while writing his first novel. He definitely knew how to blur the lines between fiction and reality by pretending to be Old Shatterhand, one of his main characters; only later in life did he reveal that he was not and that he had traveled to the USA only long after writing his novels about the 'Wild West.' And then you see how closely the Karl May Museum is connected to reality: in 2023, they came across a Swastika painted on the buttocks of a sculpture supposed to resemble a Comanche warrior. The almost life-size figure was painted by Emil Eber, a celebrated Nazi painter. None of this is visible or included in the exhibition today (Graewert 2023). And until 2014, the museum had exhibited a human skull which was only removed from the exhibition after a repatriation claim made by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians (Survival International 2014), who had to wait until 2020 when, after years of refusal, the museum finally agreed to return their ancestor (Knight 2020). These two dynamics manifest within the Karl May Museum what Lisa Michelle King calls (2026) 'the fascination with the fantasy' (p. 38) and the fantasy's ability to cover a very violent reality. This is why this place is a very clear example allowing us to understand how fantasies about colonialism and Indigenous people and the reality of colonialism in today's Germany exist side by side.

With regard to Pocahunter, I see overlaps to Segato's theory but also differences as far as my approach is concerned. Concerning Matoaka, especially in the German-speaking context, I clearly see elements of what Segato describes with her term 'pedagogy of cruelty' as a strategy of de-emotionalizing violence against people (she explicitly refers to violence against women) and thus turning them into objects that can be consumed.

What has happened with the Pocahontas story is this domination of the fiction, which made it completely impossible to connect with Matoaka and her real story, and to find empathy for what happened to her—simply because it is not known. What remains is the fictional figure, suitable only for reproducing colonial fantasies. The real history of violence has been rendered

completely invisible, it is no longer emotionally accessible, it is concealed by songs and images that in turn produce and reproduce their own violence and demand empathy, but for this fiction rather than the person behind it. These fictions correspond to the stereotypes of primitivism. They are a manifestation of the 'dispossession of life' that Segato writes about and are forever trapped in the 'process of consumption' (Segato 2021: 17).

Karl May's Winnetou, on the other hand, is a purely fictional character, completely detached from any real indigenous identity or history. There is tension here with Segato because, as a fictional character, Winnetou also has female connotations, and this association of male indigeneity with supposedly feminine traits is an important element in the 'destabilization' of Indigenous masculinity. Her clear separation of those whom she defines as 'women' from what constitutes 'Indigenous masculinity' is therefore not as clear-cut in the way these structures of violence operate as Segato describes.<sup>11</sup>

Both fictional characters, Winnetou and Pocahontas, can take up so much space because they fill a constructed void that we have both mentioned already, the void that is based on the idea that Indigenous people no longer exist and have not survived colonialism, that they forever belong to the past and are virtually trapped there, never to be part of a contemporary reality. I am also thinking here of what Johannes Fabian (1998) calls 'temporal relegation,' which he uses to describe the creation of a temporal distance from those who are constituted as 'the others.' Within anthropology, Fabian illustrates how temporal localization in the past is an important element in creating a colonial identity of 'the other' while simultaneously constructing them as inferior. Museums that own and exhibit ethnographic objects are an ideal space to study how objects are used to mediate cultural and collective fantasies about cultures and people. We can see and understand what fantasies are invoked and reproduced through these exhibitions. In particular, human remains in museums are an example of how life has been turned into consumable objects to be used violently for profit, consumption, and the maintenance of power structures. They are a symbol of total objectification.

**Suza:** There are two images that came to my mind when you were talking about Winnetou and the feminization of the 'other.' One is the cover of Friedrich von Borries and Jens-Uwe Fischer's (2008) *Sozialistische Cowboys. Der Wilde Westen Ostdeutschlands (Socialist Cowboys. The Wild West of East Germany)*, a book I came across in the bookstore of the Karl May Museum. It is a black-and-white photograph of a horse carrying a person with two long dark braids; the person is wearing fringed pants and moccasins, with the upper body bare except for a long string of pearls. They are standing on a meadow in front of a massive concrete industrial building, perhaps a power station. It's the 1980s, somewhere in the GDR.

The picture shows a member of the *Indianthusiasm* community in the GDR—white people who organized themselves in numerous clubs to dress up as and to re-enact what they imagined as North American Indigenous cultures, often in camps in the fields and forests of the socialist

industrial natures at the peripheries of cities. For me, this image speaks to paradoxical political embodiments and desires: the appropriation of a lost connection to nature and spirituality, the conflation of the mythologized gender identities of white and Indigenous masculinities, and thus the embodiment of both German superiority, which grants itself universal access rights (for example, to identities, cultures, and spiritualities that are othered), and the Indigenous struggle against settler-imperialist land dispossession. This latter identification with the fight for Indigenous lands is at the core of the Nazi identification with North American Indigenous cultures, a reversal of the colonizer and colonized positions into a victimhood that legitimizes aggression as self-defense.

The second image is an election poster that was circulating in the streets and squares of Saxony, where the Karl May Museum is located, before the 2024 State Parliament election. Saxony is the region in East Germany where I grew up, and it is at the forefront of Germany's far-right political shifts. The poster carries the embodiments I just spoke of, weaponizing them for political purposes. On the poster, Christian Hartmann, the candidate of the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU), is drawn in a cartoon style, dressed up as Winnetou in full *Indianthusiast* make-up, with a headband and a feather, a non-specific ethnic top, and leather decorations around his neck, arms, and wrists. The caption says, 'Karl May belongs to Saxony and Winnetou to German television.' With this poster, the CDU takes a clear position in the ongoing debate about both Karl May and the continuation of cultural appropriation by German television and cinema, which entered the mainstream with the 2022 decision of the Ravensburger publishing house not to republish Karl May's children's books on the grounds that they were colonialist and racist. Hartman defended his poster by saying that 'we in Saxony risked a lot for debates and freedom of expression in 1989' (Jackson 2024), referring to the political movements in East Germany that brought about the Peaceful Revolution. In this way, the poster not only sets colonial and racist practice at the core of the mythologized 'we' of white East German identity, but it also does so as a form of defense against the restriction of fascist hate speech that Hartman calls 'freedom of expression.' In doing so, the CDU is closing ranks with the extremist right-wing party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*, Alternative for Germany), which for years has been appropriating the emancipatory political experiences of 1989 and its aftermath to claim the position of white (male) victimization and resistance.

I want to close by discussing—but not showing—these two images because they bring us back to many parts of this conversation and our ongoing exchange. And they give context in terms of performances of whiteness for our future engagement with the cultures of objectification in the Karl May Museum. I am curious to see how the wisdoms of Pocahunter-Matoaka and the rich muddy pleasures of anticolonial dreaming will unsettle these contexts and scenes.

1. This text is based on the condensation and interweaving of several informal and public exchanges between the two authors in 2023 and 2024, including transcripts from recordings of our contributions to the symposium Sub(e)merging: Poetics, Temporalities, Epistemologies, organized by Petra Löffler and Marie Sophie Beckmann at the Institute for Visual Arts, University of Oldenburg, in cooperation with the Edith Russ House for Media Art on 25-27 May 2023 (publication planned for 2025), and to the program Tonight the city ++ is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +, which Suza Husse organized as part of the project When the Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession at district\*school without center Berlin in cooperation with Flutgraben e.V. on 30 May–7 June 2024. Bringing our collaboration and relational thinking and feeling into this text has its own challenges. The flow and mutual understanding inherent to our conversations is hard to evoke through written texts. The organic dialogue of our oral exchange—because we live in different cities (currently Vienna and Berlin/Belfast), this usually takes the form of long phone calls or online meetings—the spontaneity, co-thinking, shared drifting, responding to each other, banter, loops, picking up each other's thoughts, jokes, pauses, detours, complementing, and reminding one another of previous discussions and shared experiences, creating a vocabulary together—all of this is difficult to render in the linearity and registers of academic writing. After such a long time of speaking to each other, it is not easy for us to shift to this text format. We feel the added pressure that often comes when the context of academia is involved. We realize how differently our exchange develops in academic writing, how illegible our usual conversations become. Knowledge production in this field follows specific rules that have to do with the making of power and that determine what forms of knowledge are legitimate. Paradoxically, it can force a cementing of positionalities and put ambivalent demands on biographic authenticity oscillating between extractive academic patterns and emancipatory autotheory. This text is an exploration of those challenges without claiming to provide an answer that would make all those dynamics evaporate. We appreciate spaces, such as the one created by *The February Journal*, that allow for contradictions and are sensitive towards those dynamics. We are trying this new (for us) kind of exchange in the hope of being able to draw more attention to how the issue of anti-Indigenous racism in Germany can be confronted. This is why we are participating in a format that allows our conversation to be part of specific collective discussions, which, we feel, are much needed in the politically challenging times we live in.
2. An excerpt from the video performance *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, 2022, by Verena Melgarejo Weinandt. shown at Manifesta 14 (<https://manifesta14.org/event/9633/>, accessed on 05.03.2025), with the exhibition and archive project *re.act.feminism*,

- curated by Suza Husse (<https://www.reactfeminism.org/work.php?id=344>, accessed on 05.03.2025).
3. For a reference on postsocialist youth culture in the Lausitz region, where I spent a big part of my childhood and youth, and on how these political divisions played out in the late 1980s and 1990s, see Lemke 2023.
  4. See, for instance, the following quotation: 'The Romantics' search for a German identity based on a shared culture, language, descent, history, and territoriality assigned an essential and a priori antiquity to what the nationalists were only about to construct. While it seemed relatively easy to follow early linguistics and identify language as a collective property, other criteria proved to be less conclusive, given the continuous movement of people throughout Europe, especially during the fifth century. The assumption of a common culture thus rested on brittle grounds, leaving room for creativity and much wishful thinking' (Lutz 2002: 171).
  5. In my article 'A deep dive into the (collective) self. Creating Autohistoria-teoría with the performative alter ego Pocahunter,' which will be published in September 2025 with Sternberg Press as part of the anthology *Standpoint Autotheory. Writing Embodied Experiences and Relational Artistic Practice*, edited by Ana de Almeida and Mariel Rodríguez, I describe in detail the collective formations within which Pocahunter grew into existence. See Melgarejo Weinandt forthcoming 2025.
  6. See <https://forgetwinnetou.com/project/> (accessed on 24.02.2025).
  7. Pocahontas used several names. Pocahontas was indeed one of them, but this was more of a caring nickname given to her by the Powhatans. Her birth name was Amonute, and Matoaka was another given name, which was also used in her portrait painted by Simon de Passe in 1616 while she was in London. I [Verena] use her name Matoaka to refer to her, although most researchers use Pocahontas, as this feels more appropriate than using a nickname given to her by her own people.
  8. For the full English translation of the manifesto, see Indigenous Anti-Colonial Agitation & Action 2020.
  9. 'When The Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession' is a decolonial feminist infrastructure for memory politics, art and, transformative justice connecting Nairobi, Windhoek, Kigali, Dresden, Dar Es Salam, Dakar, Sinne Saloum, Jaol-Fadiouth, Cape Town, and Berlin. It is initiated by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Jennifer Kamau, Memory Biwa, Michael Bader, Rehema Chachage, René Akitelek Mboya, and Suza Husse, in collaboration with district\*school without center, International Women\* Space, Nyabinghi Lab, SOMA, Wali Chafu Collective. The speculations with Anike Joyce Sadiq, Ina Röder Sissoko, Michael Bader, Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Sarah Imani, Suza Husse, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, Yvonne Wilhem/knowbotiq for 'Tonight the city + + is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +' took place at district\*school without center Berlin with Flutgraben e.V., 30 May—7 June 2024. For details, see <https://whenthejackalleavesthesun.com/> (accessed on 06.03.2025).

10. The project was called *Antifuturismo Cimarrón: El Futuro Ya Fue* and was curated by Yuderlys Espinosa Miñoso, and Katia Sepulveda. The curators invited us, a group of artists, to think about what would happen if Europe as a trope no longer existed or had never existed. For details, see
11. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/es/exposiciones/antifuturismo-cimarron/663> (accessed on 08.05.2024).
12. See the video here: <https://repatriates.org/pocahunter/transformation-braiding-renewal-pocahunter-part-ii/> (accessed on 06.04.2025).
13. Segato formulates her decolonial feminist standpoint in comparison to Maria Lugones, see Segato 2021: 73.

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## Authors' bios

Suza Husse is a cultural worker, researcher-poet and swimmer. They work with a focus on visual and performative cultures of memory, speculation and re/imagination as well as collaborative processes, co-learning, and transdisciplinary research across different fields of knowledge and practice. Since 2012, Husse has been co-shaping the arts and community space district \* school without center in Berlin. From 2017 to 2018, they held a guest professorship for interdisciplinary artistic research at the University of Arts, Berlin. In 2016, they co-founded the collective The Many Headed Hydra for arts and publishing work that interconnects anticolonial mythmaking, queer ecologies, and transformative practices that emanate from bodies of water. They co-run D'EST, a nomadic platform and online archive for postsocialist video art, and co-initiated the collective artistic research project *wild recuperations. material from below*, on intersectional approaches to dissident politics, ecologies, and sexualities that emerged in state socialism (Archive Books, 2020). Currently, Husse coordinates the arts, community and research platform Sensing Peat for swamp and waterland ecologies and cultures at the Michael Succow Foundation and is part of the organizing committee of the Venice Agreement for Peatlands.

Email: [sh@district-berlin.com](mailto:sh@district-berlin.com)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4243-2892>

Verena Melgarejo Weinandt is a German-Bolivian artist, researcher, curator, and educator. She is currently part of the ERC artistic-research project *Repatriates* at the Central European University, Vienna ([www.repatriates.org/pocahunter](http://www.repatriates.org/pocahunter)). Before that, she was researching at the DFG Research Group *Knowledge in the Arts* at University of the Arts Berlin. Her current artistic research project focuses on her performative alter ego Pocahunter, looking at the significance of indigenous stereotypes in the German-speaking context, with a focus on how they shape cultural and institutional practices and beyond, as well as our relation to the fictive, shared imaginaries and non-human-beings as a tool to (re)create the self and collective identity. Her works have been exhibited internationally at La Vierreina, Barcelona, Manifesta 14 Prishtina, 16th Biennial Sur Buenos Aires, Biennial Sur Cúcuta, nGbK Berlin, and Wiener Festwochen Vienna. Since 2015, she has done workshops, exhibitions, publications, and educational programs around the writer and theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa and is going to publish the German translation of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* alongside a volume on Gloria Anzaldúa as a method in decolonial artistic and educational practice with Archive Books.

Email: [melgarejov@ceu.edu](mailto:melgarejov@ceu.edu)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7966-1494>