Affective Infrastructures of Re-emergence? Exploring Modalities of Heritage Practices in Nantes

Britta Timm Knudsen a and Christoffer Kølvraa b

aSchool of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark; bSchool of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

ABSTRACT
The French city of Nantes has been heralded for both its creative and complex engagements with the dark heritage of its history as France’s main slave port. In this article we examine the ways in which the colonial heritage has been dealt with in Nantes, arguing that we find here various processes and initiatives which can be understood as expressing or combining what we suggest are four main modes of colonial heritage practice: Repression, Removal, Reframing and Re-emergence. We discuss how the city authorities and local organizations with a focus on colonial heritage have ended the silent repression of the city’s slave trading heritage, and to some extent entirely reframed the city as a center of avant-garde art and culture, e.g., through the 2012 construction of Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery. Finally, we critically analyze the domesticating effect of this reframing as well as practices of removal which, by contrast, have been used to reintroduce decolonial antagonism and oppositional struggle into the public space in Nantes. Finally, we investigate whether street performances of Royal de Luxe might hold what we term potential for re-emergence; a heritage practice entailing both a re-emergent aesthetics able to engage the audience at a bodily and affective level, a re-emergent history able to both articulate the past and energize contemporary struggles, and the re-emergence of a broader field of voices and subjects.

Introduction
The French city of Nantes has been heralded for its creative and complex engagements with its dark heritage as France’s main slave port. In this article we will discuss this engagement with the colonial heritage in Nantes since the early 1990s. Our primary agenda here, however, is less concerned with a hope to add to the already substantial empirical knowledge about Nantes as a heritage case. Rather, the central ambition is to demonstrate and analytically employ a new conceptual framework for understanding different kinds of heritage practice. Nantes is chosen because the practices and discussions about the city’s colonial past allow us to identify and analyze various different...
processes of heritage practices which can be understood as expressing or combining what we suggest are four main modalities of (colonial) heritage practice: Repression, Removal, Reframing and Re-emergence (Keywords 2018). Repression here denotes practices which involve a silencing or denial of the colonial past, removal denotes situations where the presence or absence of this heritage in public spaces is actively and often antagonistically politicized, and reframing points to situations which seek to incorporate this heritage into new often consensual frames. Finally we term as re-emergence those practices which – at least potentially – open up the social space to new voices, affects and bodies, forging relations or “contact zones” between actors, and which transcend both the antagonistic dichotomies of removal and the domesticating pressures of reframing – thereby opening up the possibility for a heritage practice which can facilitate the sudden and surprising springing forth of “a lost opportunity from the past that returns to offer itself for creating alternative futures” (Knudsen 2018).

Methodologically, we would describe our approach as discourse analytical and aesthetic-affective, and draw on both secondary literature on Nantes and on observations made during three visits from 2016 to 2019, of Les Machines de l’Ile, the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery and performances of Royal de Luxe – which in different ways all entail contemporary artistic or commemorative practice engaging with the city’s colonial heritage. We have also prioritized the inclusion of other perspectives and voices, not connected to our own position – as Northern European ethnic majority academics. We therefore engage with representatives from community organizations working on colonial heritage (Les Anneaux de la Mémoire, Metisse-à-Nantes and Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer). Interviews with representatives from these organizations were conducted in October 2019.

But before turning to the case of Nantes, we want to conceptual unfold of each of the modalities and their potential interrelations.1

Modalities of Heritage Practices

We talk here of “heritage practices,” because this concept emphasizes that, although we in many cases deal with actual material heritage sites, the practices that should be analyzed also encompass its immaterial dimension: the discursivity, performativity and affectivity in play in and around various forms of colonial heritage. Drawing on the field of hauntology (Derrida 1994; Frosh 2013), one might say that these different modalities can be thought of as different ways of dealing with “colonial ghosts” and the affects that they generate (Khanna 2003). Indeed, all symbolic commemorations of the past work through social actors who attempt to govern, control and encourage collective affects (Anderson 2014, 26; Hourcade 2017). Whether it is anger, national pride, sympathy with the victims of historical horrors or empathy with former generations’ hardship through re-enactment scenarios, all forms of commemoration can be analyzed as media that attune audiences affectively (Massumi 2009). An affective analysis of colonial heritage practices works by investigating the connections between affective life and processes of mediation, representation and performance; by asking how different commemorative media exert affective power over audiences and what kinds bodily capacities emerge from these encounters. As we hope to make clear, the mediation of heritage, the representation of communities, the performances of political struggle and – as a result – the levels of affective intensity evoked, differ between the different modalities of heritage practice.
To begin with then, what we term repression fundamentally regards a management of the past that seeks to prevent certain parts of it being represented in the present (Kølvraa 2018b). Therefore, in choosing to speak of “repression” – and being aware of its psychoanalytic origins (Jones 1993; Billig 1999) – we seek to distance ourselves from the implied passivity indicated when thinking in terms of what is forgotten (vs what is remembered). Repression denotes a kind of “active forgetting,” a refusal to remember or allowing to be remembered. It is a (unconscious or implicit) mode of action and not simply a passive lapse (of recollection). Repression shares something with the notion of “silencing” put forward by the historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot 1995), because it secures social reproduction and communal hegemonies through the domination of public space and discourse. It fundamentally constitutes a denial that something haunts the present – a refusal to admit that there are ghosts among us. This is typically enforced by marginalizing or “making invisible” those voices, bodies, objects and sites in and through which this ghostliness asserts itself.

It is this strategy of silencing and exclusion from the public space which is directly challenged in practices of removal. While the concept of course refers most obviously to those instances where this challenge takes the form of a demand to remove, replace or destroy a material signifier of colonial domination, such as monuments, statues or street names, the core of this modality is not defined by the kind of material (or immaterial) objects it is oriented towards. Rather, it is defined by the active contestation of public space and visibility, and thus by the spectacular and antagonistic politization of colonial heritage, which involves demanding a social acknowledgement of this past and its present shadows. Removal is therefore often a direct challenge to long established practices of collective repression, and it takes the form of an affectively intense performance of political antagonism in the public space. But to stay with the duality of repression and removal – and thereby to simply mirror the old dualities of memory studies; remembered vs. forgotten, powerful vs. marginalized – does not enable us to capture the whole range of heritage practices at play in Nantes or elsewhere. This is because both repression and removal share a strictly dichotomous imaginary which struggles to conceive of any overlap, mixture or common ground between the poles of the dichotomies through which both modalities are typically articulated: absence/presence, majority/minority, silence/voice or recognition/suppression. Such dichotomous thinking is certainly not present in all heritage practices. Indeed, it is especially important to stress that repression – i.e., silencing and exclusion – is not the only modality through which the social explosiveness of colonial heritage can be controlled. One of the most significant features of Nantes as a heritage case is perhaps how the reframing of the city’s colonial heritage became a core element in building the image of Nantes as an urban site of courageous avant-garde cultural initiatives, and how, crucially, this can be seen as involving a domestication of the potential political energy of this heritage. Reframing in this sense can basically be understood as the production of communal narratives which are able to accommodate the presence of a colonial heritage by moving beyond both repressive silence and public confrontation. This in itself is of course not problematic. Indeed, it can to some extent be understood as the very gesture of building a “third space” (Bhabha 2004) as a response to real or potential social fragmentation. And yet, when such reframings are constructed and enforced from a site of power, there is often the risk that even as those who were formerly silenced through repression, are given voice, their voice is restrained by its
staging within a certain frame, which might even risk losing much of their dislocating potential in relation to the political and social status quo. Thus, while reframing can transcend the dichotomous imaginary defining both repression and removal – and might do so in a progressive and future-oriented way if put in the hands of those marginalized groups finally allowed to “tell their own story” – it can equally be an efficient tool for social control. If new stories emerge from and are controlled by traditional sites of power, they might serve to restrain and stylize the ghosts of the past, locking them in specific “haunted houses” to be observed not on their own terms but as an operating part of frames constituted by touristic, aesthetic, narrative or social logics channeling and domesticating the colonial past without any real ambition to push towards a truly decolonial future. Before turning finally to re-emergence, we want to make it abundantly clear that none of these modalities are conceived of as neat and strictly bordered conceptual boxes, where a given heritage practice would, as such, always belong in one box and not another. Rather, these concepts might constitute what DeLanda calls a parametrizing of the notion of colonial heritage practices, allowing us to make distinctions and differentiations without, in the process, succumbing to “dualistic thinking” (DeLanda 2006). These modalities of heritage practice therefore make up a field of tension in which a concrete instance of heritage practice might be situated in-between or as a mixture of different modalities. Indeed, analytically, the whole point would often be to track how a given practice slides between different modalities or engages in one while showing traces of or potential for another.

This is perhaps never more true than for the notion of re-emergence. Indeed, this modality especially is less a category than a horizon. Re-emergence is the point towards which we can imagine – and identify the potential for – heritage practices that sketch out renewed constellations of the future in a “pluriverse” world (Mbembe 2001, 2015; Mignolo 2009, 2017; Sousa Santos 2011). We draw inspiration from Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ and Walter Mignolo’s ideas of decolonial futures and a sociology of emergence. In particular, de Sousa Santos’ notion of a critical utopia is approachable via dia-topical hermeneutics, which in the face of Eurocentric monologues of modernity would insist that all cultures are incomplete and become enriched by dialogues and encounters with other cultures, not by enacting a defence of or an imagined return to an essential cultural purity antagonistically poised against its constitutive outside. In this sense, re-emergence would be present the moment we move clearly beyond any dichotomous thinking of repression and removal, putting into play notions of decolonial futures which do more than restate the horrific fault lines of the past, but which does so without succumbing to the narrative (and affective) domestication of reframing. Indeed, in terms of affect, practices of re-emergence cannot be about laying to rest or otherwise restricting the dislocating potential of the ghosts of colonial heritage. Being haunted precisely concerns being drawn affectively, sometimes against one’s will and always unsettlingly. Specters draw us into structures of feeling that connect us to the reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge but as an offer of a transformative recognition (Gordon 2008, 8).

We therefore take inspiration from Walter Mignolo in thinking about re-emergence as a heritage practice which might challenge existent power geometries by, first, allowing new and several subjectivities to gain visibility and voice in ways not reducible to clear antagonistic camps or stable and self-contained identities. Secondly, by facilitating a re-
emergence of the history of colonial struggles against exploitation, marginalization and oppression in ways that might reenergize and inspire new political projects – ultimately connecting acknowledgement of a horrific past with the hope for a better future – and thus with contemporary movements for change. And thirdly by involving an aesthetics of re-emergence capable of releasing affect into the public space, of moving and engaging with the audience through the enactment of new inconceivable possibilities harnessing enthusiasm into collective actions for a more just future (Mignolo 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017; Mignolo et al. 2011; Mignolo and Vazquez 2013) (Figure 1).

The field of heritage practice, defined by these four modalities, is therefore differentiated along two dimensions, one indicating the extent to which dichotomous thinking dominates social imaginaries (most true for repression and removal) and one which indicates the extent to which affects are controlled and domesticated (most true for repression and reframing). This makes clear that the idea of re-emergence in fact embodies the hope that modalities of heritage practice might yet be imagined which are able to release transformative intensities of affect in ways which open up the future to forms of sociality capable of mobilizing, including and recognizing individuals across and beyond the divisions inscribed in the dark heritage of colonialism (Kølvraa 2018a).

In Nantes, we will argue, heritage practices of repression have long since given way to interacting and interweaving processes of removal and reframing. Indeed, it is the back and forth between these two modalities which seems to have characterized the last three decades. The question is then whether any of these practices – in glimpses or in part – can be said to alter into re-emergence.

**Repression and Nantes’ Slave Trade History**

Before the ’80s it was quite hidden away [occulté]. It was almost a taboo, not to be spoken about. It was a painful subject and according to them not talking about it was a way to solve the problem – while quite the opposite was the case. It was assumed that the past would be dangerous for the city’s image. (Olivier Chateau in Manilève 2017)

Anyone familiar with Nantes today – with its acknowledgement of the colonial past, especially in and through the *Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery*, the first memorial to
colonialism in France – might struggle to imagine a time in which the preferred municipal approach to the city’s historical role in the slave trade was one of “silence and discretion” (Hourcade 2015, 92); a time when this past was not, as today, a central part of the city’s self-understanding and commercial tourist brand but something painful, taboo or even dangerous. This is further compounded by the fact that Nantes was the principal French port for ships engaged in the slave trade, serving as the departure site for 45 per cent of all French expeditions (Hourcade 2015, 92). More than 1,800 expeditions were launched from Nantes as part of the triangular trade, carrying around 500,000 men and women to the Americas, in particular to the Caribbean Islands, Haiti and the Louisiana coast. And while it is true, as Valognes notes, that being a point of departure, rather than a site of detention or exploitation of enslaved Africans, broadens the scope of how it is possible to represent such a past, the cityscape is unequivocally shaped by this trade (Valognes 2013, 152). The Quai de la Fosse which served as the mooring point of transatlantic ships – among them slave-vessels – sits next to the grand houses built for and by the owners of those vessels (Hourcade 2015, 94–95). The historical emergence of Nantes as a wealthy commercial center is inextricably bound up with this history. Its role as a harbor-hub of the slave trade, and later commercial French colonialism, generated capital inflows, industrial development, social dynamism and ultimately the urban landscape which made the city. If the French national memory has struggled to incorporate colonialism, because this would threaten to undermine celebration of the country’s republican values (Frith 2015, 69), then Nantes seemed to be trapped by the fact that the history of the slave trade and colonialism framed both its “golden age” and its greatest shame; the Quai de la Fosse signifying “death and sufferance on the one side, and commercial entrepreneurship and wealth on the other” (Hourcade 2015, 95). In 1983 a local event was planned to mark the 300-year anniversary of the Code Noir (the French law regulating slavery), but the mayor at the time refused to support it, fearing bad publicity (Hourcade 2015, 92), and in 1986 the Mairie likewise refused to support an academic conference on the history of slavery at the University of Nantes (Valognes 2013, 160). While in response the organization Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer was set up in 1986 and instituted its own annual ceremony commemorating the victims of the slave trade by throwing flowers into the river Loire from the Quai de la Fosse (Valognes 2013, 160), the municipal authorities in the 1980s seemed determined to ignore both the organization and the past it wished to commemorate.

The conceptual point to be stressed here is that the heritage practice of repression must be thought of as exactly that, a practice; as actions taken aiming to force something to become invisible – even if those actions might in some cases manifest simply as a sustained policy of neglect or willful ignorance. Unlike forgetting, which connotes a passive process of letting go, repression is a process in which the subject protects its present and future integrity by actively refusing to confront or “know” part of the past that made it. But this past will not simply disappear; it continues to haunt and torture the subject, making repression a sustained and exhausting process, not a momentary gesture of elimination. Repression – from Freud’s first formulation of the idea (Freud 1953 [1915]) – is thus in a sense defined by its failure; by that which despite our efforts keeps returning to haunt us. It is as such a misunderstanding when memory scholars such as Smelser reject the concept because it is thought to signify too complete a victory of the present over the past (Smelser 2004). Equally, it seems too simple, like Irwin-Zarecka, to think of repression
as a concept only with relevance for individual memory, on the ground that in collective memory everything is “out in the open” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Not only is there nothing essentially individual about repression (LaCapra 1998), but as the field of hauntology has explored at length, our social and political lives are full of “ghosts” that we refuse to see or know – and which are as such neither here nor gone (Gordon 2008; Frosh 2013). If one is to understand what happened in Nantes in the late 1980s, it is less helpful to think in terms of city suddenly “remembering” its colonial past. Rather, we need to explore the conjunctures which meant that the efforts to repress it could no longer hold out or were no longer needed. The colonial past in Nantes was always there, it did not have to be unearthed, discovered or proven, but that it could suddenly escape the repression which had made it inarticulable was, in Nantes’ case, very much a consequence of how it was incorporated into a wider vision for the city’s “cultural rebirth.”

Reframing and Removal in the Municipal Recognition of Colonial Heritage

Culture makes you dream in Nantes. (B, Métisse-à-Nantes, 10/9/2019)

One of the most striking aspects of Nantes’ engagement with its colonial heritage is the rapidity with which it shifted from repression of the colonial past to its reframing as part of a city-wide rebranding initiated by socialist mayor Jean-Marc Ayrault, who succeeded in defeating his conservative counterpart in 1989. In the following years, the municipal authorities, aided by various cultural entrepreneurs and actors, worked hard to incorporate the colonial past and its material layers into a new narrative about Nantes as a hub of avant-garde cultural initiatives and projects. Indeed, facing its dark past would only enforce the city’s new avantgarde image at a time when this past was, elsewhere (e.g., Bordeaux), still being forcefully repressed. The new mayor soon established connections to organizations which had long been pushing for official acknowledgement of this heritage and the first important co-initiative was to suggest a grand exhibition in the Nantes Castle Museum about the city’s slave trade history. The exhibition was a massive success. Entitled Les Anneaux de la Mémoire, it ran from 1992 to 1994 and attracted an impressive 400,000 visitors.

One might see a potential for re-emergence simply in the way the exhibition made it possible for invisibilized bodies and repressed voices to enter the public space and discourses. However, it still framed inequalities of colonialism as a historical phenomenon and it did not spill over into discussions about present-day racism. A former member of Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer of Martinique origin recounts how his ambition to pursue a political career was still in the 1990s often blocked by his skin color even within the socialist party of the mayor, forcing him to conclude that “decolonization is a perpetual endeavor” (A, 10/9/2019). The city’s reframing agenda seemed to have very clear consequences for how, by whom and with which agendas, the slave trade history could be displayed and narrated. Some of our interviewees stressed the double invisibility they have been subjected to, first by being part of an unacknowledged minority, and secondly in seemingly being relegated to the margins of their own political project as it was domesticated into a city wide reframing gesture led by the mayor’s office; “our tireless political battle underlying any progress in Nantes concerning the colonial past has not been acknowledged really. For example, we were not invited to the inauguration of the Memorial [to the
In fact, the process leading to the memorial was started by an intervention directly challenging the Mairie’s control. On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in 1998, several local and national organizations working with colonial heritage and anti-racism commissioned a statue by art student Lisa Marcault-Derouard, “without the authorization of the municipal council […] to alert Nantes’ politicians to the need for a permanent memorial site” (Cherel 2012). Having an iconic form – a naked woman with both of her arms stretched upwards, triumphantly holding her broken chains against the sky – the statue echoed “La Délivrance” statue commemorating the First World War and offered to eleven occupied French cities. The statue was revealed on 28 April, but already, two days later, it was subjected to symbolic damage: Both arms were cut off, the chains were put back on the body and it was overturned (Sayagh Ouest-France 5 May 1998) (Figure 2).

This incident is a good example of the dynamics of the heritage practice we term removal. It orients itself towards occupation of the public space, with the insertion or elimination of (material) signifiers in this space serving as condensation points for
intense communal affects. As theorized by Ernesto Laclau, these materialities become something akin to “empty signifiers” (Laclau 1996, 2005), around which the entirety of the grievances and hopes of the decolonializing struggle is condensed and articulated antagonistically. That the core logic of removal is antagonistic is illustrated by the dichotomous logic of absence/presence that it reveals – linked by Laclau to the Lacanian theory of identity and lack. Confronted with an antagonistic opponent, the subject cannot be fully itself; it is damaged by this presence. There is, as such, an inherent tension between this heated affective logic of removal and the often complex, multivocal and heterogenous “third space” logic promised by reframing. While the statue certainly came to represent an antagonistic confrontation very clearly through its destruction, it is important to stress that it was already itself, from the beginning, a powerful intervention in the public space; defying the reluctance to fully embrace Nantes’ colonial past, also in relation to contemporary social and political exclusions. These instances are as such illustrative of the pitched public battles often characterizing heritage spaces embroiled in practices of removal (Knudsen and Andersen 2018).

But the destruction did not in fact eliminate the (site of) the statue as a focal point of heritage practice. The empty pedestal was not removed, but instead it was furnished with pictures of the statue before and after its destruction. Valonges sees this as adding a “further transitory dimension to the composition” (Valognes 2013, 164), and indeed it would seem that in this simple gesture something new was opened up. No longer simply the introduction of a presence (of a material signifier in the public space) or absence (the destruction of the “Other’s” signifier), but rather a “ghostly” presence-in-absence; a presence of that which is no longer or indeed not yet (cf. also Knudsen and Andersen 2018). By way of this “empty place” overflowing with both mourning and hope, the affective intensity invested in the statue as a particular gesture of “removal” was in a sense released by its destruction, and transformed into a less bounded affective resonance capable of animating subjects and bodies around a much wider and more extensive priority: the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery. As a former member of Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer puts it: “We [the memory associations] formed an alliance with the people of Nantes because they reacted very strongly against the damaging of the abolition statue. And that persuaded the municipality to opt for an official memorial” (A, 10/9/2019)

If – somewhat crudely put – removal practices tend to be high on affective energy but low on complexity, the opposite can – equally crudely – be said of reframing. As already noted, the affective energy evoked in removal gestures can be domesticated when entangled in the narrative networks of reframing strategies. The construction of a “third space” is often to be applauded, but it does carry the risk that those clear and intense grievances animating practices of removal are smothered along the way. This can, for example, happen by integrating the colonial past into narrative structures which, although acknowledging it, only does so in its “pastness”; thereby removing it from the contemporary struggles of marginalized groups for recognition or a better future. Such tendencies did indeed seem to present themselves in the discussions leading towards the establishment of the memorial in 2012.

As analyzed by among others Nicola Frith, the memorial became the focal point, not so much of a struggle about whether the colonial past should be repressed or displayed, but rather a struggle about how it should be represented (Frith 2015). A central fault line was
whether the memorial should didactically represent and even celebrate a historical event (abolition), or whether it should invoke the horrors of the colonial past in order to energize and animate the passions of an ongoing struggle for equality and justice. It was a contestation of the same memorial space by both affective elements of a removal struggle to antagonistically occupy public space and a reframing project to heal this space through a consensual narrativization (Figure 3).

In fact, the initial plans submitted by artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and architect Julien Bonder can be read as seeking to mediate these two dimensions (Cherel 2012). Wodiczko made it abundantly clear that he saw a parallel between the history of slavery and contemporary struggles against racism – and that he wanted the memorial to articulate this parallel (Frith 2015). Meanwhile voices close to the mayor’s office, especially, worried that overemphasizing this dimension would make the monument vulnerable to symbolic appropriation by certain groups, instead of it becoming a general symbol of Nantes’ new image. As it stands today the monument is therefore a strangely composite experience. It simultaneously wants to aesthetically (and affectively) convey an echo of the horrors of slavery (taking the form of a subterranean chamber shaped to recall the inside of a (slave) ship’s hull) and to didactically relay – in a restrained yet clearly celebratory narrative style – information about the actors and processes leading to abolition. While the representational-didactic element is very dominant through the large information panels stretching the length of the subterranean passage, and while the enforcement of a certain direction of movement embeds the visitor in a teleological narrative process, the underground and enclosed space, as well as its materiality of concrete and water, does engage the visitor affectively (Frith 2015). But it does not become the intense and immersive experience that one might expect. Upon entering the

![Figure 3. The subterranean passage of the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery, 2012 shaped to recall the inside of a slaveship’s hull. Image Credit: (Knudsen 2019).](image-url)
subterranean passage, one – rather than being made “unsafe” by the environment and the suffering it aesthetically represents, one finds oneself in a relative well-lit reading room being pedagogically informed about events and people mostly removed in historical time from present or local decolonial struggles. The narrative reframing which in our reading dominates the monument does, as such, domesticate what can be voiced and with what consequences. When the narrative presented is so clearly angled at celebrating the end of slavery, and the role of French citizens and the French republic in bringing this about, the potential for using this heritage to speak of the still precarious position of minorities in French society today is side-lined. One might even suggest that the memorial as such, because it ultimately does not make the visitor “uncomfortable,” is in danger of simply becoming yet another of Nantes’ cultural offerings; equivalated with and incorporated into, rather than dislocating and disturbing, the city and its public space. As such, one cannot escape the feeling that there is a “mythical” double signification (Barthes 2013) of the site whereby its actual representation of slavery and abolition simply becomes the signifier of a wider message; namely, Nantes’ self-celebration of its new avant-garde identity. The memorial in this sense has ended up as a crucial cornerstone of Nantes’ domesticating reframing of its colonial heritage, even if its beginnings – with the destruction of the first statue seemed to carry the promise of a new kind of heritage practice.

This back and forth between gestures of reframing and interventions of removal has not been restricted to debates around the memorial. And it is by no means always a simple confrontation between municipal authorities and activist organizations. When for example a French national commemorative day for abolition was introduced in 2005, the mayor was actually invited to take over the central role in Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer’s old ritual of throwing flowers into the river. For the organization and the mayor, this ritual was ideal because it involved a symbolic evocation of the historical victims of slavery, but it did not indicate any contemporary aftermath. Also, while its stylized form might invite a certain ceremonial display of emotion this is hardly conducive to unruly affects and the making of an “unsafe space” (Stylianou-Lambert and Bounia 2016). Hourcade argues that a “carnivalesque” affective unruliness can instead be found in the so-called “March of the Slaves” (Hourcade 2015). This was an unauthorized addition to the 2006 anniversary of abolition in which the organizations Metisse-à-Nantes (2003) and Passerelle Noire (2006) performed a reenactment of slaves being driven to market, walking through the city while being abused, berated and even killed by their white guards. The viscerality of the performance and its intrusion into the ordinary space of the city made this a very confronting kind of heritage practice. It sought to engage, shock and unsettle onlookers by directly simulating the violence of slavery, rather than metaphorically representing it through ritual. And while a former member of Mémoire de l’Outre-Mer found the display “sinister” and questioned the right of anyone to “ape” the actual suffering involved in slavery (Hourcade 2015, 102), it did serve to make visible a more activist and politicized practice of colonial heritage. It rejected the more consensual reframing of slavery evident in the rituals backed by the alliance between the mayor’s office and certain of the older organizations in Nantes. Instead the march reintroduced an antagonistic imaginary through its representation of the raw violence at the heart of slavery, but also by seeking to make clear the links between this heritage and contemporary societal faultlines and conflicts. This was
emphasized by the 2011 invitation of Malcom X’s daughter and the participation of members of the organization Anti-Négrophobie. As noted by Hourcade, these were deliberately dressed to evoke the memory and image of a non-compromising tradition of “Black” resistance, namely the Black Panthers and other military elements of the American Black Power movement (Hourcade 2015). The visceral form and embodied engagement of the march did, in other words, manage to shake off any comfortable reframing of Nantes’ slave heritage by employing exactly and to great effect the means and forms that we would associate with a heritage practice of removal. It involved the occupation of a public space into which one either inserts or eliminates material signifiers (here the re-enacting bodies), which come to serve as “anchors” of communal protest and affective investment, but which in doing so tend to articulate both present and potential social relations and alliances along dichotomous lines, rather than which we associate with re-emergence.

It would seem therefore that the heritage practices observed in Nantes only intermittently realize what we would side Re-emergence; a heritage practice capable of both affective intensities, the articulation contemporary struggles, and the pluriverse imagining of common futures. Yet, as noted in the beginning, if re-emergence is to be thought of not simply as an empirical category, but also as a normative horizon, then the analytical gesture becomes less to critically evaluate what qualifies, and more to seek out the potentials and promises of that which seem to move in the right direction. And there are certainly such potential in some of the various citizen-based and artistic initiatives: in the presence and ephemeral absence of the statue, in the visceral impact of the march and to some extent in the concrete aesthetics of the memorial. But the combination of an affectively intense performativity and a complex pluriverse articulation of colonial heritage and its present legacies is clearly hard to realize. In the final part of this article we will look for it in what we consider to be a core case of cultural avant-garde activity in Nantes, but one which has rarely been given a decolonial reading; the well-known street theater group Royal de Luxe and the “spinoff” theme park Les Machines de l’île established on the Nantes harbor front to permanently house some of the mechanical giant marionettes employed in Royal de Luxe’s performances. Royal de Luxe has certainly been a hub of performativity and creativity in Nantes, internationally praised for their fascinating steam-punk inspired aesthetics and the highly emotionally engaging nature of their style of “gigantic” street theater. What has less often been focused on is the fact that Royal de Luxe’s performances and to some extent the giants of Les Machines de l’île incorporate and arrange signifiers and themes with a clear connection to the colonial heritage; perhaps most obviously in the figure of the “le petit géant” (the little giant), a six-meter high one-ton African boy, La Danseuse or the impressive Sultan’s Elephant able to carry passengers and spurt water (Figures 4 and 5).

The question we want to pursue below is simply whether Royal de Luxe’s performances playing such a central role in Nantes’ cultural avant-garde milieu – can be said to entail a re-emergent potential in their distinct and affectively engaging aesthetics and performances, or whether they are conversely – by they playfully steam-punk incorporation of colonial signifiers – adding to a recentering and innocenting of the white hegemonic majority (Tuck and Yang 2012). In other words, we seek to gauge to what extent Royal de Luxe, read as a modality of heritage practice, succeeds in opening up the public space to the three elements of re-emergence which we have identified by drawing on
Figure 4. In front of the shipbuilding yard at the harbor front in Nantes, we see a mechanical giant in the shape of a brown female dancer, on a sunny day enticing locals and tourists to join. The crew of digital “puppet masters” is part of the visible infrastructure of the spectacle. Image Credit: (Knudsen 2016).

Figure 5. A “soft” colonial signifier in the form of an elephant reframed into an affective infrastructure is what the city of Nantes also offers to audiences. Image Credit: (Knudsen 2016).
the works of Walter Mignolo; a re-emergent aesthetics able to engage the audience at a bodily and affective level, a re-emergent history able to both articulate the past and energize contemporary struggles, and the re-emergence of a broader field of voices and subjects entering into new alliances or socialities across and beyond the divisions inscribed in the dark heritage of colonialism.

First, however, we need to say something more about how Royal de Luxe can be read as a colonial heritage practice.

**Royal de Luxe and Colonial Heritage**

Royal de Luxe have worked in Nantes since 1989. Their giant marionette puppets have been part of their annual performances in the city uniting engineering, artistry and imaginary power from a science fiction world, not least inspired by the works of Nantes’ own Jules Verne. The creatures take the form of magnified mechanical toys – at once enormous entities of steel and wood, and yet always visibly controlled and animated by a myriad of strikingly uniformed technicians (so-called “manipulateurs”), the giants seem to transcend dual or binary conceptions of dead/alive, mobile/immobile, mechanic/digital, artefact/nature. Royal de Luxe have created a whole family of giants comprising unfamiliar and unexpected alliances across territories and species: besides the little giant and the elephant, there is the 9 meters high “Big Giant,” a smaller female giant with horsetail hair, “The Diver” wearing shoes of size 237, “El Campesino” who is a Mexican peasant, twin brother to the big Giant and uncle to the small female giant, a holy Aztec dog and a grandmother half Irish, half a descendant of Brittany.

Royal de Luxe’s performances have shown a continuous interest in colonial heritage and themes. In the 1990s and 2000s, most obviously in performances such as The Giant fallen from the sky (1993), Return from Africa (1998), Petit Contes Nègres (1999) and Petit Contes Chinois Revus et Corrigés par les Nègres (2001), but also more recently in El Xolo (2011) and Le Mur de Planck (2014) (Royal de Luxe, Nantes 2012). A material trace of the performance El Xolo (2011), a mural in the style of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera depicting 200 years in Nantes’ history, gives prominence to representing signifiers of the city’s colonial heritage such as enslaved individuals in chains. At the immediate level of simple representation there is as such no doubt that Nantes’ colonial heritage is signified in Royal de Luxe’s performances, but one might also see a more subtle engagement with this heritage in the distinct form and staging of their style of street theater.

Royal de Luxe seems to be using an idea of the city as a contact zone in which interactions and encounters between people who are different take place (Stevens 2007, 9); to stage unusual and unexpected encounters, such as the one happening in the performance Le Mur de Planck between Grandmother and her adopted child from Cameroon (the little giant). This kind of encounter seems to want to evoke the city as a decolonial contact zone in the sense given to this term by Mary Louise Pratt, who characterizes postcolonial cities as places “in which cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991, 34).

But in inserting colonial signifiers into a dreamlike, yet highly tactile and nostalgically mechanical spectacle, the world-making of Royal de Luxe can also be seen as an aesthetic gesture recalling the old material and mechanical infrastructure (e.g., harbor cranes)
which made Nantes part of the commercial circuit of French colonialism. They now re-emerge as affective infrastructure orienting and engaging audiences through their experiential value, ultimately mediating the emotional relationship between the city’s past, its reframed urban space and its different audiences (Stäheli 2012). We want therefore to start by further investigating how – beyond the mere representational level of the performances’ outspoken narratives or direct historical references – the giants become such “affective infrastructures” capable of evoking nostalgia, pride and hope, going even.

**The Rhythm of Giants**

The street performances by *Royal de Luxe* must be perceived as an integrated whole constituted by a complex assemblage of heterogenous components both belonging to the performance itself (puppets, strings, scaffolds, puppeteers, performers, props, audiences) and components belonging to urban space (streets, audiences, passersby, buildings, cars) through which various human, technological, infrastructural, affective and institutional components together result in the distinct capacities of the performance (DeLanda 2006). In conceiving of the performances as affective infrastructures, we have already pointed to what can be identified as the primary capacity of these assemblages: their ability to evoke affects. This is especially clear in the performance entitled *Le Mur de Planck*, in which aesthetic components such as rhythm, scale and hypermediacy together serve to engage and move the audience.

*Royal de Luxe* work explicitly on rhythms, e.g., slowing down the everyday busy pace of urban streets through the circadian rhythms (Lefebvre 2004) of giants who sleep, wash, brush their teeth and eat. But most fundamentally, there is a rhythm to the sudden appearances and disappearances of the giants from the streets of Nantes. Theater leader Jean-Luc Courcault points directly to the secrecy, magic and mystery that surrounds *Royal de Luxe* because everybody knows that a spectacle will happen but nobody knows exactly where or when (Courcoult 2014).

Furthermore, in pursuing a street theater form that incorporates the whole city in playful activities and insists on the emancipatory force of performances in urban spaces, *Royal de Luxe* can be seen as attempting to realize a situationist idea of unitary urbanism, involving the construction of a space between work and residence; a space which becomes a sphere of freedom, leisure and life itself and as such is both a critique of, and a response to, the neoliberal city, in line with Lefebvre’s insistence that the heterogenous, the unpredictable and the (im)possible encounter are fundamental features in urban space (Lefebvre 1996, 129). Such encounters are central to *Le Mur de Planck*, which culminates in the overwhelming scene of the little giant and the Grandmother dancing tenderly in the city square. What *Royal de Luxe* are trying to realize through their street performances – in glimpses and utopian dreamlike scenarios – seems to be the ideal of a truly intercultural urban environment, an ephemeral and temporary answer to the question that a member of *Mémoire de l’Outre- Mer*, points to as the principal one: “How can we live together being different?” (A, 10/9/2019).

Petra Hroch has argued, in the same vein, that the giants of *Royal de Luxe* “transform the city into a stage for a larger-than-life drama. [They] present an alternative dimension to everyday life by virtue of their scale” (Hroch 2011, 249) and thereby come to embody a “critical utopia” instigating hope “for more lasting change to take place” (265). This is
linked to the dual positioning of the audience vis-à-vis the giants, in that the massive creatures on the one hand “belittle” us, reminding us of “the modesty of our own power and agency in this world” (256), and on the other hand offer a normative ideal through their example, implicitly demanding that “when inhabiting a shared space with others, we, when playing giants, ought to be benevolent and kind” (265).

But the giants also simply evoke strong feelings of love, care, awe and wonder. They feel alive even though their animation is a visibilized process. This quality of the experience is quite obvious in the testimony of the storyteller Jocelyne Briac who, even if fully aware that the voice comes from a visible human body and not from the puppet itself, recounts her encounter with Grandmother:

The voice is extremely important for a storyteller; voice and gestures and she (Grandmother) had both by the way. Her body and her face were expressive, telling a story worth being listened to. That is what happened today; the audience was there, and in people’s faces, one could see the happiness of being there together. (Briac 2014, 14:13)

Her statement seems to us to be a wonderful example of how Royal de Luxe are capable of establishing a fictional contract with audiences by creating an immersive environment that people believe in, even though it is rich in Brechtian “verfremdung” (Brecht 2014) and clearly follow a logic of hypermediacy acknowledging multiple acts of representation made visible (Bolter and Grusin 2002, 33–34) most obviously by the myriad of living bodies and the machinery of wires and levers clearly connecting and moving the giants’ massive body parts. But rather than destroying the illusion of life in the puppets, this manipulation by others generates instead a sense of vulnerability around the giants’ bodies. A vulnerability which originates from the fact that it is totally dependent on others or more precisely that others relate to it, take care of it, protect it, help it. We would claim therefore that as affective infrastructure, the giants of Royal de Luxe – through the aesthetics, materiality and choreography of their huge manipulated bodies – disseminate an affective ecology of love, care, benevolence and vulnerability into the urban space. Affects which are no doubt central to decolonial hopes and futures, and which often emerge in the performances around signifiers clearly linked to colonial heritage – the elephant and the little giant being the most obvious examples.

Royal de Luxe’s performances in our view therefore certainly approach an aesthetics of re-emergence capable of releasing affect into the public space, of moving and engaging audiences through the enactment of new “inconceivable” possibilities for encounters, for example also seen in their new spectacle “Miniatures”(2019) taking place in the St. Herblain suburb of Nantes. In this venture they move audiences away from the center in order to actively decenter the arena for cultural expression.

But, it is less obvious whether a wider politico-historical re-emergence is actually achieved. This would require that the implicit heritage practice of Royal de Luxe performances become an active resource for contemporary struggles and for the marginalized voices undertaking them. Tellingly, several of our interviewees seemed to appreciate the theatrical quality of Royal de Luxe, but without seeing it as relevant to their struggles. One interviewee from the organization Anneaux de la Mémoire, for example, praised the live performances because they “address emotions directly and because it is important that this originates directly from the senses” but did not see any immediate connection to the colonial past. Rather he/she “would connect it to the imaginary world of Jules
In the same vein, two interviewees from Métisse-à-Nantes enthusiastically agreed about the aesthetic quality of Royal de Luxe’s performances, exclaiming: “Oh! It is too good!” (B. C. Métisse-à-Nantes, 10/9/2019). But they likewise did not consider the cultural initiatives of Royal de Luxe as paralleling the memory work undertaken by their association and other actors with a clear decolonial agenda.

What this might illustrate is the danger that any critical (de)colonial themes embedded in the performances “drown” in the immersive experience of the affective infrastructure. The subtexts of intercultural community and decolonial hope – as we have teased them out above – are seemingly not clearly received by the audience. Instead, the various colonial signifiers appear as semantically disjointed elements in an aesthetic bricolage which is enjoyed without much concern for its normative connotations.

As affective infrastructures, the giants are powerful; their ability to engage urban audiences in intense, and important emotional relationalities should not be underestimated. It likewise seems quite clear that Royal de Luxe believe that they have an intercultural and to some extent decolonial agenda in their performances. However, the atrocious past of colonial violence is in most cases only indirectly evoked and the colonial signifiers mobilized are not coherent enough to make this past re-emerge as a resource for contemporary actors in Nantes. Thus, going back to Pratt’s idea of the city as a contact zone, one if forced to consider the possibility that what Royal de Luxe accidentally produce is – contrary to what they explicitly desire – the city as a comfort zone for a (white) majority (Ifversen 2018), whose subjectivity and authoritative gaze is never really challenged. This criticism was echoed by one of our interviewees from the association Les Anneaux de la Mémoire. Characterizing the engagement with decolonial themes by Royal de Luxe as purely instrumental: “They are just using the colonial past in their performances as decoration” and, further, “I would be tempted to say that it has perverse consequences and that it is just entertainment. There would be nothing wrong with that but one just has to take into consideration the tragedy of this subject” (E, Anneaux de la Mémoire, 10/7/2019). Here we are moving beyond the mere worry that the decolonial message might be “drowned out,” and towards a potentially much more serious critique which has ultimately to do with the way certain subjects are treated and represented by Royal de Luxe. It concerns in this sense the dimension of re-emergence which is about allowing new subjectivities to re-emerge in complex and innovative ways not reducible to clear antagonistic camps or self-contained hegemonic identities. Indeed, one of the harshest critiques leveled at Royal de Luxe came from theater critic Sylvie Chalay after Royal de Luxe had traveled to Cameroon in 1997–1998 with the ambition to present their performances and draw inspiration. According to Chaley, this ambition to impress the locals in a radically different location first failed to acknowledge existing theater traditions. But even more damning, the figure of the little giant, she claimed, represented nothing more than a reiteration of a deep colonialist dream, the image of a black subject fully controlled by white agency (Chalay 2000). In such a reading the little giant might indeed appear as nothing more than a repetition – on a grander and more artistic level – of the kind of unthinking or insensitive significations of the Other notoriously exemplified by the “black doll” – a popular toy for European children until not so long ago. And that the presence of the technicians and the manipulative interactions with the giant body therefore – in the case where this relationship inadvertently maps onto a colonial one between black
and white bodies – produce not simply vulnerability, care and dependence, but also contain a horrific echo of the imperial ideal of a huge and powerful “colonial body” (whether in terms of territory, resources or manpower), totally steered, controlled and animated by a “modern” European mind and its technical knowledge. One could of course object that the aesthetic form of giant puppets visibly manipulated by comparatively miniscule humans is common to all Royal de Luxe’s creations and that the same “manipulative” relationship therefore also apply to those giants who do not signify coloniality (e.g., Grandmother). However, that is perhaps exactly the point, that colonial signifiers are integrated into the aesthetic surface of the performance in the same way as those not marked by this heritage. It is not just that the use of (de)colonial signifiers is too discrete or fragmented to constitute a clear message and thus to make the audience mindful of such themes through the performance. Rather it is that those conceiving of this performance in the last instance are not sufficiently mindful of the fact that some signifiers – in this context primarily the black body of the little giant – are tainted by Europe’s colonial heritage in ways that ultimately mean that they cannot be available for aesthetic manipulation or incorporation on a par with everything else.

Thus even if Royal de Luxe do make the colonial heritage visible, and also attempts to fold this into an affective ecology of mutual care and dependence, its re-emergent potential is ultimately undercut by the playful, or even naïve, use of signifiers implicitly soaked in colonial violence, and their incorporation into a steam punk aesthetics nostalgically celebrating the materiality and tactility of industrial modernity. This is certainly no longer simply the repression of modernity’s colonial component, and the whole infrastructure of affect constructed seems at least intended to attune to an ethics of vulnerability, care and dependence, very different from that implied and necessary at the height of antagonistic “removal” struggles. Nevertheless, an inherent incommensurability remains which would seem to regard not the right to be represented, or even to be heard, but something deeper and more unsettling: the right to look still attributed to one side of the visual power geometry. This fundamental privilege of the modern European subject remains entrenched also in Royal De Luxe; the power to (re)frame the Other is what prepares the right to gaze at and to enjoy the spectacle of the Other; as a thrilling danger, as an object of desire or influence, as exotically out of place, or as the “problem body” (Tlostanova 2018) to be contained and disciplined. This is perhaps what happens in Royal de Luxe’s attempts to encourage diversity and encounters in the city. Although forging wider alliances, the spectacles do not seem to fully escape the potential domestication of reframing involving in some cases what Prat calls the strategies of “anti-conquest”; those gestures which manage to assert majoritarian innocence and hegemony at the same time, for example by rejecting overt racism or colonialism, while still retaining elements of the subjectivity it produced: the “seeing-man,” “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possesses” (Pratt 1992, 7).

Conclusions

We have sought in this article to demonstrate the value of a new conceptual framework for discussing different heritage practices consisting of the concepts of repression, removal, reframing and re-emergence. We have argued that, in Nantes, the various and often complex dynamics of heritage practices of both municipal authorities and civil
actors become legible as in fact alternating between different overarching strategies to either contain or make use of this heritage for various ends. Nantes being France’s largest slave port, this heritage remained mostly silenced and repressed until the late 1980s, where after it quickly became part of a broad effort to reframe the city as a cultural avant-garde hub. What our framework allows us to point out, however, is that this reframing also served a domesticating purpose, which was continually challenged by various actors employing what we have called removal practices through which decolonial grievances and antagonisms find expression in the public space.

Ultimately, however, we have prioritized the discussion of whether Nantes is also a site of so-called re-emergence, defined with inspiration from Mignolo as heritage practices which aesthetically and affectively engage audiences in modes of representation and conversation that facilitate giving voice to a wider field of subjectivities formerly marginalized, invisible or unimaginable, and which, as such, are capable of making the history and heritage of colonialism a resource for contemporary struggles for better decolonial futures. In analyzing the performative universe of *Royal de Luxe* it becomes clear that re-emergence is not easy to achieve or sustain. Indeed, the challenge of creating a space in which various audiences are affectively engaged and joined, while maintaining a complexity of voices and subjectivities, seems so “unsafe” an endeavor that even if a certain re-emergent dimension or potential is identifiable in a specific heritage practice, it seems to be always on the verge of breaking up, slipping back or being hollowed out by either the self-sufficient power of a hegemonic gaze, the seductive intensity of antagonistic enmity or the domesticated security of consensual narratives. Therefore we have called re-emergence a horizon, and we want to think of it as a continuously present potential, a potential whose realization takes the form of momentary glimpses rather than a stable vision.

**Note**

1. The present article, and the special issue of which it forms a part, was written in the early months of 2020, before the murder of George Floyd set into motion a near global wave of protests against contemporary structural racism and the dark colonial heritage that is its ultimate historical ground. Suddenly, calls and actions to decolonize society were everywhere, and in many cases entailed exactly the kind of struggles about material colonial heritage in urban space that this special issue focuses on, and that the present article seeks to develop an analytical vocabulary for understanding. We have not however sought retroactively to fundamentally revise the text or to change its focus, believing that its conceptual work is still a valuable contribution to the field, even if newer cases for repression, removal, reframing and reemergence now seem everywhere to present themselves.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work forms part of the ECHOES project which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770248. H2020 European Research Council.
Notes on Contributors

Britta Timm Knudsen, Professor in Experience Economy and Scandinavian Studies, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University.

Christofer Kølvraa, Associate Professor in European Studies, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University.

ORCID

Britta Timm Knudsen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1804-7232
Christofer Kølvraa http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8600-914X

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