5 (Un)writing with children

Creating the space for epistemological justice

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At a talk delivered at the Tate Modern Gallery in 2012, distinguished sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos poignantly stated that "there can be no global justice without cognitive justice" (Santos 2012). As academics we are part of a global knowledge system which is largely inherited from colonization, and as such, our contributions may well account for, or against epistemic diversity. Decolonial voices have repeatedly called for an undoing of the epistemic violence which belittles other perspectives (Mignolo 2009; Santos 2018; Maldonado Torres 2007; Quijano 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Following this call, new forms of knowledge production and research methodologies have emerged through the rise of critical, indigenous, feminist, and queer voices (Denzin/Lincoln 2008; Haraway 1988; Tuhiwai-Smith 2008; Viruru/Rios 2021). While these contributions have attempted to dismantle ongoing coloniality, there has been little effort to question the conceptions of childhood within its framework (Thomson/Baraitser 2018; Millei/Silova/Piattoeva 2018; Canella/Viruru 2004). Both the colonial Other and children are inextricably linked through a colonial imaginary of primitivism, associated with prematurity in relation to the masculine, autonomous, white, self-sufficient adult (Montgomerey 2009; Murris 2018; Thomson/Baraitser 2018). The child and the colonized remain to some extent, the "antithesis of the modern condition" (Rollo 2018: 11f.). Participatory approaches have made it a point to actively include children's voices in anthropological inquiries, starting as early as the 1980's (Scheper-Hughes 1987; Van de Loo/Reinhart 1993; Cheney 2011). However, since children have been excluded from the writing process itself, these efforts have been largely criticized regarding their promise of voice and authenticity (I'Anson 2013: 109). My own attempts to co-author with children are inspired by my firm belief in epistemic justice and political standpoint to contribute towards the undoing of dominant imaginaries. As I felt confronted

with my own presuppositions and limits to what I had set out for, I found my efforts eye-opening and playful, but also challenging and even unsettling at times. After all I was faced with the circumstance, that "desiring an equal playing field, even actively working towards it, does not make it so" (Meer/Miller 2021: 9). Questions of asymmetry remain unresolved; yet, withstanding loose ends may well lead us into new narratives of rendering each other able. For children to add to our discourse we need to allow for stories which do not lay claim on the ultimate truths perpetuated by a dominant universal knowledge system, but which may well be fundamentally particular. We need to provide for spaces which do not adhere to the narrative of capitalist and imperialist adult institutions, but that allow for knowledge to emerge from divergent place-times which facilitate each other's imaginaries. It is here, in these divergent spaces, that our discourse can contribute towards social and cognitive justice through questioning our own presuppositions of being the only ones who have valid contributions to be made. So far, I have focussed my academic interest mainly on topics related to reimagining education and more specifically democratic learning and unschooling. I was curious on how spaces designed to orchestrate knowledge and its transmission can be organised along togetherness, conviviality and essentially around caring for each other rather than hierarchical concepts of knowledge-ism and ageism practiced in most educational institutions. This included explorations of co-researching and co-authoring with children as well as adolescents in the field. However, in this article, I decided to discuss my experiences and recurring questions of shared knowledge production by reflecting on attempts of (un)writing with my 8-year-old daughter Manou. To do so I focus on our experiences of engaging in social justice discourse within the climate justice movement at a protest camp in Munich in the summer of 2021. I discuss the close relationship of colonialism, ongoing coloniality and knowledge production as well as the historical correlation of colonialism and childhood, as these shape our imaginaries of who a knowledgeable person is, and who can be considered a legitimate participant in what counts as knowledge. However, despite this paper being about writing and not about talking together, I lay emphasis on the search for epistemic symmetry in spaces where orality is granted equal recognition. Ironically perhaps, this paper's academic diction excludes Manou or any child her age from comprehending it.

5.1 The three C's: Colonialism, coloniality and childhood

There is a profound connection between our conceptions of knowledge and the legacy of colonialism which leads back to the very foundations of modern thought. The Cartesian dichotomous relation of subject and object gave way to a desubjectified knowledge regime which rendered all other knowledges particular and superstitious, as it laid claim on universal truth (Lander 2002; Grosfoguel 2012; Dussel 2000; Maldonado Torres 2007). By muting other knowledges alongside the political and military force of colonialism, local histories of European concepts became global designs" (Mignolo 2011: 279). This fuelled into the monolithic, dominant character of the principles of western thought, "imposing provincialism as universalism" (Quijano 2007: 17). Leave aside the fact that rational thought should have questioned the possibility of universal knowledge in the first place – as Quijano says: "Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnie should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnie is called Western Europe" (Quijano 2007: 11). The power structures inherited by colonization, however, did not end after colonialism reached its administrative end; coloniality survived colonialism.

> "It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and every day." (Maldonado Torres 2007: 243)

As coloniality has trickled into our webs of meaning making, the coloniality of being and coloniality of knowing overlap, producing an ontological Other on the basis of epistemological discrimination and vice versa. Thus, the call for decoloniality has been addressed broadly to ways we perceive knowledge, gender, sexuality, class, race, and spirituality (Mignolo 2000: 54). As such, a decolonial turn necessarily addresses problematic hierarchies in its broadest sense. "Thinking otherwise" (Escobar 2007) or "delinking" (Mignolo 2007) from dominant epistemologies have become watchwords of a transformation within and beyond academia. Decoloniality urges us towards an epistemic shift, which ties knowledge production towards political and ethical transformations and more so, opens up pluriversal spaces of knowledge production which allow for silenced knowledges to emerge (Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Santos 2018). Regarding the contribution of children towards emergent

and cocreational knowledges there remains the question of why they have been excluded in the first place.

Historian Philip Aries has argued that the western conception of childhood emerged at the beginning of modernity, mainly through institutions of education, which separated the child from the adult world (Aries 1978 [1960]: 47). Childhood hence is a constructed social and cultural category "historically produced and then 'naturalised' through various cultural practices and social institutions" (Zahevi 2018: 243). Furthermore, I argue that historical entanglements of childhood and colonialism are regarded as epistemologically inferior. Given that the child was viewed as inferior and often subjugated long before colonization, it is important to consider the specific impact that the concepts of childhood had during the colonization process and still have within the framework of coloniality (Rollo 2018; Canella/Viruru 2004). Through statements such as "The native is to be treated as a child and denied franchise" (Cecil Rhodes, in Nandy 1987: 58) it becomes apparent that it was only against the epistemological backdrop of the child Other, that the colonial Other was able to be constructed (Rollo 2018). Until the 20th century the analogy of savage/child was kept alive in evolutionary theories and was reinforced by anthropological encounters: "we cannot understand the mind of the adult until we study the development of the mind of the child; […] we cannot understand the social and religious life of civilized races until we study the development of the social and religious life of savage tribes" (Kidd 1906: 7). The savage was to become the distant sibling of the child and vice versa. The structures of power and domination towards colonized peoples and towards children are grounded in a temporal timeframe of evolving from simple to complex (Murris 2013; Thomson/Baraitser 2018; Canella/Viruru 2004). Both children and the colonized Other are treated "as 'becomings', not 'beings', as 'persons in the making', not 'persons'" (Murris 2013: 254). However, the logic of discrimination inherent to "becoming" is entangled with the assumptions of the child/savage lacking rational thought; hence, as epistemologically inferior beings who are assigned to the natural non–thinking world. Karin Murris, professor of early childhood education and posthumanist thinker has argued that children are victims of epistemic injustice, a term coined by Miranda Fricker. Epistemic injustice concerns:

> "… a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. I call them *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of cred-

> ibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences." (Fricker 2007: 1)

Indeed, testimonial injustice can be understood as the practices involved when conveying knowledge to someone and hermeneutical injustice is concerned with the capacity to make sense of our own experiences (ibid.: 1). While testimonial injustice causes a diminished level of credibility or trust towards a speaker due to a prejudice, meaning a prejudice "qua social type," (ibid.: 4) hermeneutical injustice touches upon a more complex notion of "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (ibid.: 155).

Karin Murris who applies Fricker's concepts to the epistemological othering of children, sees children as being victims of testimonial injustice due to their age, and victims of hermeneutical injustice due to their undermined faith in making sense of the world and their own experiences. In either case, "children can be seen as suffering from epistemological injustice, as their capacity to participate in decisions or discourse is diminished by "adults' implicit and explicit assumptions and prejudices about child" (Murris 2013: 247). Children, hence, are not regarded as knowledgeable to the extent they may not articulate knowledge or may not feel confident in their ability to contribute towards it in the first place. Taking Fricker's argument into account, what we are facing when examining the epistemic othering of children thus is linked with the prejudice the adult world assumes and assigns to the child as a category, leading to their exclusion from knowledge production. Only through the intervention of the adult, as in the formally educated upper-class-white-male-heterosexual-adult-knowledge regime, are children institutionally directed towards legitimate participants of societal discourse. "Chronobiopolitics" (Freeman 2010: 4) manage children's mental and physiological development through meticulously predefined standards and towards "socioeconomically 'productive' moments, which ultimately constitute what it means to have a life at all" (ibid.). In order to become, one needs to acquire knowledge, pursuant to the desubjectified/ universal rationality, and in order to be, one has to have become. As Zahevi states: "Becoming is a concrete micropolitical action" (Zahevi 2018: 253).

Hence, the possibilities for children to participate in our discourse is entangled with what we consider firstly as legitimate knowledge and secondly

as a legitimately knowledgeable person. However, it is important not to fall for a simplified image of children as a homogenous group who are victims of adult culture. Quite the contrary; anthropology has repeatedly shown that there are many childhoods with their own means of agency adding towards and shaping adult culture (James 2007; Van de Loo/Reinhart 1993; Corsaro 1997; Alex 2009). Yet, the perspectives of younger people are notoriously underrepresented in anthropology (Hirschfield 2002). Taking a decolonial standpoint towards the contributions of young humans however may elucidate some of the power structures underlying our meaning making processes and add towards a more pluriversal concept of epistemic ability. A question that arises is whether we can use a decolonial perspective to add towards our own discourses by rendering children epistemically able.

5.2 Emergent places

"What was that word again, that they wrote in the invitation?"

My 8-year-old daughter Manou is trying to write up her thoughts and reflections for an article on a discussion organized by the climate justice movement in Munich, which she and I had been invited to in the summer of 2021. Members of different groups had called to camp in a central area of Munich, organizing talks and acts of civil disobedience against the International Motor Show *IAA Mobility*[1], criticizing the show as a symbol of greenwashing and profit maximizing at the expense of climate as well as social justice. Within a few days the central Theresienwiese, which normally hosts the famous *Oktoberfest*, a fun fair attracting millions of tourists every year to ride rollercoasters and drink copious amount of beer, was turned into a tented village of protesters hosting a creative mix of talks, discussions, and workshops. One of the discussions taking place in the Zapatista tent, was especially aimed at critically questioning the options of participation for people who relied on care, such as children, single parents and people who are being disabled. Manou and I, who had attended several Climate Camps before, had been invited by a friend to discuss about the following topic:

> "A radical social transformation from below and to the left should be shaped by all and for all. To what extent does the climate justice movement in Ger-

1 https://www.iaa-mobility.com/en. Last accessed on 26.08.2022.

> many succeed in realising this claim? Is the movement accessible for people with disabilities, for older people, for single parents, for children, for all those who depend on care work? What is going well here and what could go better?"[2]

"What does radical mean?" Manou had asked me after slowly reading the first words. "What is social transformation?" she had continued, "Why below and left?" Something that "could go better" became obvious before the discussion even took place; the vocabulary that was being used was undecipherable to a young human. After explaining and translating, Manou was thrilled to participate and was determined, that not understanding the invitation in the first place was going to be one of the topics she wanted to address. We talked a lot about the upcoming event, and it became clearer to me, that so far, she felt that what she had to offer to the world had not counted as much. Despite my own efforts to take her seriously in her day-to-day life, Manou very well knew she was largely excluded from public discourse. At the discussion however this adversity proved to be highly valuable. Manou hesitantly offered her opinion on matters of injustice among the ages and the resulting issue of epistemic imbalance. First by whispering into my ear and asking me to say her words out loud, and later with her own voice she expressed her doubts about being a legitimate contributor concerning several aspects, two of which I would like to mention here in more detail: Firstly, the language often left her feeling 'stupid' as she herself stated, adding that she was not able to follow adult discussions, and secondly, if she did say something she lamented being regarded as cute and/or unqualified. Zahevi has argued that cuteness is degrading, "making resistance much more difficult than in the face of open and blunt oppression" (Zahevi 2018: 248). Oppression has many faces and despite Zahevi's rightful critic, blunt oppression cannot be counteracted by children either; however, in the context of epistemic injustice, cuteness most definitely blurs epistemic oppression, rendering the voice of the child null, void, and irrelevant, as it does not have to be considered. Hence, cuteness easily becomes the foundation of testimonial injustice, as adults use it as a means of enfeebling young people's perspectives. It likewise becomes the foundation of hermeneutical injustice as children doubt their own capacities as knowers. Similarly, the use of language acts as enforcing hermeneutical injustice. Young people cannot follow

2 https://mobilitaetswendecamp.noblogs.org. Last accessed on 02.05.2022.

discourses, even on matters concerning them, as vocabulary is not adapted towards their needs of understanding and as a result acquire a distorted image of themselves as being knowing bodies.

At the discussion however, Manou's initial struggle with language and legitimacy developed into a fruitful dialogue and resulted in new perspectives that emerged on the meaning of social justice within the climate justice movement, on tender and empathic language, on the importance of radical listening, on caring for each other's perspectives and enabling each other through our differences.

5.3 First Cycle

As an anthropologist interested in cocreational and emergent knowledges I asked Manou for collaboration on an article. Taking up the inspirational mood of the discussion, here she was, trying to remember "those words" they had used and trying to give a written account of what should "go better", whilst struggling to find a format of written expression that would suit her needs. Not understanding "those words" coming from an adult/academic mindset had initially opened the discussion about social justice at the Zapatista tent. However now, this process seemed to reverse itself. The power relations immanent to language which had given birth to counteracting epistemic injustice within the setting of a discussion now acted as reaffirming it within the setting of writing. After some attempts, she gave up in frustration. Writing consumed a lot more time, Manou was unexperienced typing on a computer and the logic of building up a text divided into different strands of thought that had to be arranged into coherent sections felt strange, unnatural and exhausting to her. While oral knowledge was a practicable part of her social reality and lived experience, written knowledge had to be analytically constructed in temporal and social distance to the actual event. There is a long-lasting asymmetry between oral and written knowledges which can be traced back to the tools of colonizers and elites using written knowledge as a method to silence oral knowledges (Santos 2018: 61ff.). To this day, the prestige of written knowledge exceeds oral transmission, needless to be said that "the dominant criteria for ascribing prestige are established in contexts where written knowledge prevails" (Santos 2018: 56). How to account for orality in a knowledge regime of the written word?

5.4 Second Cycle

This had not been our first attempt of writing together, as we had previously discussed her contributing towards my master thesis on reimagining education (Mc Clanahan 2021). Manou had largely shaped the fieldwork period and outcome in Greece; she connected with some young people one afternoon, and it was because of her, that I got introduced to a whole world of unschooling families. However, exploring the possibilities of actively including her in the writing process were initially categorized as problematic by some members of faculty. This reflected to some extent the black hole in anthropological literature, in which children as well as accompanying spouses or other part-takers in research processes if appearing at all could be considered fortunate to be mentioned in the acknowledgement sections (Braukmann et al. 2020: 2). Although an ethnography is seldom a product of one person alone, important partners can be swallowed whole, as social and/or emotional involvements clash with the image of the objective researcher still prevalent in anthropology (Gupta 2014; Dreby/Mose Brown 2013: 10). This is even more obscure, considering that anthropological research is built on the premise that their research subjects are social beings, embedded in social ties and relations, those however being vanquished concerning the researcher him/herself (Gupta 2014).

Despite the doubts of other members of faculty, my final supervisor greatly supported my effort to write with Manou. I shared many conversations with her, about how to interpret what certain informants had said, how the fieldwork period was for her, what she thought of learning, knowledge, and education; nevertheless, in the final product she hardly appeared (Mc Clanahan 2021). I was under pressure with deadlines and Manou had an entirely different temporality which did not correlate well with the closing dates of an examining office. Our first attempt pretty much failed, if failure is measured by output of written text. That in mind, our second try to co-author an academic article on the discussion at the Zapatista tent unfortunately didn't turn out much different due to the reasons I have previously mentioned.

However, shortly afterwards, a magazine specializing on social and ecological transformation fell into our hands which had opened a section for youth contributions and Manou suggested to try and write up the thoughts of the evening once more. This time our attempt differed greatly as it offered much more breathing space in terms of time and format. We had the time to try, to fail and to try again in a fairly relaxed manner. Manou started working with visual aids; She copied the invitation text and started underlining all the words

she was unfamiliar with, making it easy to understand the percentage of difficult language that had been used as well as drawing pictures of the impressions of the evening. Concerning the written part of the article we finally homed in on Manou's suggestion to use interviews for which we both had prepared questions, and I agreed to her request that I would transcribe them.

5.5 Uncertainties

Writing with Manou was governed largely by my methodological inexperience. However, in retrospect I found that inexperience was not necessarily a drawback in all cases per se; the first two attempts of writing within an academic context made it difficult for me to stay open towards obscuring the form I imagined a written piece of work was supposed to have, and insecure about how to tie our very different approaches together. How could I account for epistemic justice towards a young person if the complex language I used for theoretically framing it was feeding into epistemic injustice? The paradox of trying to bridge two worlds while not being able to avoid simultaneously enforcing their differences, was stultifying to some extent. Was it possible that using theory itself became an agent of epistemic violence, as Manou would not have been in the position to understand her own "story?" However, within settings considered informal, such as in the Zapatista tent or the article for the magazine, these paradoxes seemed to become tangible in a way that allowed me to address them. Additionally, my methodological inexperience now seemed to aid me, as I remained open and with little preconception of the process. I quite heavily relied on Manou coming up with ideas of how to proceed on her own. After all, the call to decolonize methodologies does not come with a user manual and decolonizing praxis rightly so has been labelled a "messy process." (Meer/Miller 2021; Gill et al. 2012: 11). In a way obscuring the methodological responsibility was now beneficial, as it allowed Manou to come up with the respective methods that would resonate well with her understanding of the situation. Although I remained slightly insecure at times considering issues such as our relation as mother and child, I felt freed up by not having to adhere to the conventions of academic writing. Nonetheless, considering Manou's ability to stand for herself, she still relied on my expertise in other formal issues, such as operating the computer, formatting the text, or communicating with the editors. Despite her being able to come up with her

own ideas of how to contribute, prerequisites for equal contribution were still high and hindering her from autonomously participating.

Within anthropology, the ambiguous question of children's voice and representation was highly influenced by the *writing culture debate* of the 1980's (James 2007). While participatory approaches tried to minimize imbalances and questions of representational power, others included children as co-researchers in order to politically strengthen the recognition of children's perspectives (Alderson 2000; Cheney 2011). However, critics pointed out that the promise of authenticity by including children's voices still loomed mediocre, as there was the risk for masking asymmetries rather than actually empowering children (Lane/Blank/Jones 2019: 698). Furthermore, it was argued that problematic aspects of representation would remain prevalent as the ethnographies were still the product of different practices largely controlled by adults (I'Anson 2013; Spyrou 2011; James 2007). I'Anson criticizes that so far "the phase of textual redaction" (I'Anson 2013: 109) is still mediated by adults.

The fact that academia is now moving towards an effort to decolonize writing, modifying its own systems of knowledge production and most importantly to include the voices of the historically marginalized not just through the voice of those who study them but as co-authors, constitutes an important epistemic shift. However important this transformation is, it may not yet fully embrace or account for perspectives which are difficult to reproduce in writing. Children's knowledges, such as Manou's contributions on social justice at the IAA, are often fundamentally situated and fundamentally social, tied into the fabric of life and therefore difficult to replicate later, as temporalities specific to childhood are often immediate and situated in the present (Thomson/Baraitser 2018: 68). The temporal and affective distance which writing entails can create epistemic gaps which are not easy to bridge, despite co-authoring being a step towards increasing cognitive and social justice. Shulamith Firestone concludes the chapter on childhood in her revolutionary feminist book *The Dialectic of Sex*, saying "There are no children yet able to write their own books, tell their own story. We will have to, one last time, do it for them" (Firestone 1971: 104). Sadly, 50 years after her publication this remains an unfulfilled desire as the stories-never-to-be-told have yet to manifest in written form. Indeed, stories of young people might still heavily be in need of mediation as they have to navigate through the aberrations of a written knowledge system carefully staged by adults, in and even outside academia.

Questions of power imbalances when writing with children are complex and unfortunately, we are still unlikely to resolve them. However, I strongly

suggest that we do not let these uncertainties paralyze our efforts. After all, circumventing contested voices of children "ultimately reinforces the language of those in power" (Canella/Lincoln 2007: 320). To some extent we might have to become comfortable with the thought that we need to "deliberately fissure the expectation that a reliable (unmediated) representation is in fact possible" (I'Anson 2013: 110). What we can commit to, is to critically question who benefits from our inquiries, who we want to be accountable to, what practices have given voice to children, which of our own mechanisms may further discredit children's voices in our inquiries.

5.6 Ponderings

As Santos said, invisible voices are actively produced in higher education institutions; the decolonial aim is to "symbolically enlarge" (Santos 2018: 250) those experiences and uncouple them from their initial settings to show their transformative potential. The social and ecological crisis we are facing urges us to take responsibility for diverse perspectives in search for new narratives. If we think of responsibility as "respons-ability," (Haraway 2016: 130) as our ability to respond to the questions of our times, academia may well have to confront its own limitations. In terms of accounting for ageism and epistemic injustice towards young people, we might have to leave the beaten path behind. As Bayo Akomolafe suggests, we need to go into the wilds; into the liminal spaces of the periphery which do not follow the same epistemic rules of abstract reductionist thinking (Akomolafe 2017). Emergent places may offer other ways of epistemic justice towards young people, as they prefigure more pluriversal concepts of epistemic ability, accounting for fundamentally social and partial perspectives. However, as members of a dominant knowledge system it is for us to decide at what expense we enable or weaken them in our academic inquiries.

Writing with children, especially with young children, particularly in, but also outside academia is not insurmountable. However, it remains a task "riddled with complexity," (Meer/Müller 2021) as it raises unanswered questions of representation, ambiguity, and power. Consequently, the result cannot easily be a smooth version of our work; rather we need to learn to sit "with mess, confusion and relative disorder" (Law 2004: 2) in our inquiries, as much as we need to sit with them in life. By radically listening to the powerful subtleties that young people have to offer and opening up spaces for co-creation, we can

undo some of colonialities' most commanding imaginaries. Firstly, we can question our own assumptions about being the only ones creating and holding valid knowledge; secondly, we can work towards prefiguring spaces that challenge testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Decolonizing knowledge production through thinking, feeling, talking, writing, joying, and empathizing with young people opens up possibilities of enabling each other in our imaginaries. However, this does not mean to do away with our differences; quite to the contrary. It means recognizing and acknowledging all humans within our plurality and divergence and opening paths for knowledge to evolve from these differences. Enabling each other opens up learning spaces in which *caring* for each other's perspectives allows us to contribute towards social and cognitive justice together.

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