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Unpacking Silencing to Make Black Lives Matter: Ethnographies of Racism in Public Space

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Abstract

This article focuses on the debates surrounding decolonisation and antiracism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Switzerland. They sparked new discussions within Swiss institutions, particularly city governments, about racism, colonialism, and physical changes to the material environment for which activists have advocated. Based on an empirical example in Zurich, the article examines the dynamics of (un)silencing when city governments respond to demands by local antiracist groups who ask for the removal of racist street names in public spaces. We draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies to examine practices of silencing and being heard, combining it with Rancière’s understanding of depoliticisation. The empirical case study shows that the actions and voices of people directly affected by racism were key in advocating for institutional change as well as addressing colonial remnants in urban spaces. This case shows how the demands of social movements can amplify marginalised voices and how they can also lead to new forms of silencing. This article explores the complexity of silencing practices that disregard the plurality of voices, and political movements focusing on the depoliticising of interpretations of antiracism in public debates while simultaneously neglecting the diversity of voices affected by racism. It contributes to debates on how racism is voiced and silenced in progressive and liberal urban institutions.

Keywords

antiracism; cities; city governments; coloniality; colonialism; public space; racism; silencing; social movement; Switzerland

1. Introduction

At the end of 2021, the Zurich City Council announced its decision to cover two inscriptions of the m-word on houses in the old city centre because of its racist connotations. The impulse for this decision was given by an initiative of Kollektiv Vo da., a local collective of Black people and people of colour with Swiss nationality that works against racism and discrimination. It initiated an impactful campaign to bring this issue to public attention. This is only one example of struggles in Swiss cities to remove racist and colonial heritage from public spaces. Other examples are the struggle around the statue of David de Pury in Neuchâtel, the figure of Carl Vogt in Geneva, or a racist mural in a public school in Bern. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement played an important role in this struggle. It was a moment par excellence when material objects worldwide became targets of struggle, including in countries that did not directly lay claims on colonies, such as Switzerland. The visible contestation of monuments that glorified persons who profited from, helped to support, and built systems of slavery and colonialism should be understood as ways to challenge not only the past but also contemporary urban and national narratives. Contestations resonated across the Atlantic as a reminder that the colonisation of the Americas and the racist ideologies that accompanied it cannot be understood independently from developments in Europe. The calls to remove these monuments from public space, and to make space for the narratives of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, whose (hi)stories continue to be invisibilised and silenced, are often met with resistance from those who feel that removal will lead to the erasure of history. As a result, municipal authorities must deal with contradictory claims and must navigate a shifting political landscape. In this article we aim to unpack what aspects of the antiracist and decolonial approaches are silenced, (re)interpreted and (de)politicised both by public institutions and social movements.

The ways urban governments have addressed the naming of buildings, streets, and statues imbued with residues of colonial histories have been praised, contested, and criticised within communities of colour, social movements, politics, and the media (Colpani et al., 2022; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Mbembe, 2017; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Newsinger, 2016). Colonial histories and the marginalisation and exclusion of people of colour from and within predominately white European cities are inscribed in city spaces (Cattacin & Gamba, 2021; Ha & Picker, 2022; Nayar, 2016; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022). Cities function as archives (Bacchetta et al., 2015; Burgum, 2022), where colonial history manifests itself materially for example through gable stones, statues, or paintings. Through these objects, cities produce a certain kind of narrative based on, for example, nationalist and racialised representations of citizenship (Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016), which enforces the trope of a normalised white European identity, and ignores and silences its colonial history (Boatcă & Roth, 2016). Interest has arisen in how (city) space produces a historical memory among racialised bodies living within a colonial legacy of violence, exclusion, and exoticisation (Arghavan et al., 2019; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Fanon, 1961/2007) and how it also produces racist and colonial images of Black people and people of colour resulting in discriminatory institutional practices (e.g., El-Tayeb & Thompson, 2019; Plümecke & Wilopo, 2019).

Postcolonial research shows how Switzerland has participated in and benefited from colonialism (Fässler, 2006; Kølvråa & Knudsen, 2020; Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015; Purtschert et al., 2012; Schär, 2015; Suter, 2019; Tanner, 2015) and shows the need to expand our knowledge on how this history affects institutional structures, infrastructures, policies and the everyday experiences and behaviours of citizens today (Bassel, 2014; dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022; dos Santos Pinto & Purtschert, 2018; Plümecke et al.,

2023). Switzerland was involved in what has been described as “colonialism without colonies” (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015) by participating in or benefiting from colonial enterprises. Through managing and safeguarding wealth generated from colonial activities (Zangger, 2011) Swiss businesses engaged in the international trade of goods, arms, and enslaved peoples (Purtschert et al., 2012), and Swiss mercenaries fought in the French and Dutch colonies (Krauer, 2021; Schär, 2015). Although the bulk of studies in Switzerland approach the colonial past as a historical question, some studies create a link between a colonial past and a racist present (e.g., dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022; El-Tayeb & Thompson, 2019; Terkessidis, 2021). Antiracist and racialised activists with hybrid research profiles are particularly active in placing these connections on the political agenda, notably regarding police violence, racial profiling (Collaborative Research Group, 2019; Thompson, 2021; Wa Baile et al., 2019), museum collections (Ryser & Schonfeldt, 2020), and historical heritage (dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Fässler, 2006). A connection that is particularly relevant for this study are issues around belonging (Dijkema, 2022; Schilliger, 2020) and substantive citizenship, about who has the right to claim rights (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), and experiences of exclusion and feeling out of place in public space (Dijkema, 2021; Vergès & Vrainom, 2021), emphasising how these feelings are rooted in historical colonial dynamics.

This article examines the dynamics of (un)silencing in city governments’ responses to demands and criticisms by local antiracist groups who ask for the removal of racist street names on city-owned public buildings. Based on ethnographic observations during public debates and interviews, we draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies specifically examining silencing, and combining it with Rancière’s understanding of depoliticisation. This article gives insights into how institutional responses to the demands of social movements can simultaneously amplify the voice of Black people and people of colour, and result in new forms of silencing. It unpacks what aspects of the antiracist and decolonial approaches are silenced, (re)interpreted and (de)politicised both by public institutions and social movements.

1.1. Silencing in Theory

Subaltern studies show the importance of addressing power imbalances in society and stress how having a voice and being heard are essential to social justice. Silencing requires the deployment of power because it is only through the exercise of power that one “determines what is audible and visible, which utterances are of concern for the community and which are to be dismissed as unworthy noise” (Rancière, 1999, as cited in Selmeçzi, 2012, p. 499). The core premise of deliberative democracy is based on the false idea that “political decisions should be reached through a process of deliberation among free and equal citizens” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 1). For subaltern groups, such as racialised citizens, it is difficult to openly challenge structurally asymmetric power relations through nonviolent political action, as their claims are often dismissed as noise. According to Dikeç (2007, p. 177), who analyses the political expression of racialised inhabitants in the French banlieues, the problem is that:

The republican imaginary is so white and so Christian that any manifestation of discontent—either on the streets or in the spaces of institutional politics—by the Republic’s darker and non-Christian citizens, quickly evokes concerns about the values and principles of the Republic.

Although the political systems and historical contexts are different, we think that this is also true to a certain extent in the Swiss context.

Silencing is an outcome of epistemic violence which, according to Spivak, is the systematic disqualification of marginalised people's experiences and their incapacity to reflect on the latter through the imposition of a conceptual framework that disqualifies their experience. Epistemic violence still denies racialised citizens in Switzerland their political subjectivity. Its function is to "damage a given group's ability to speak and be heard" (Dotson, 2011, p. 236). In her work on the subaltern's possibility of discourse, Spivak has described the difficulties of addressing epistemic violence, as the latter attempts to eliminate the knowledge possessed by marginal groups (Dotson, 2011). The embodied experiences of inequality are one form of such knowledge, and epistemic violence is responsible for the difficulty in making this knowledge visible and audible.

Our approach to silencing from a subaltern perspective is informed by Spivak's (1988) famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Subaltern studies are a specific current in postcolonial studies. Authors such as Guha (1985) and Spivak (1988) borrow the term "subaltern" from Gramsci (1934/2021), who understands subaltern as being in a position of subordination to hegemonic power. They share the criticism of elite historiography and seek to write the history of the subaltern: those who are mostly absent from the archives. The contributions of subaltern studies, and in particular Spivak's work on whether the subaltern can speak, are relevant for analysing institutional processes of silencing. Spivak asks whether these subaltern groups can truly express themselves and be heard within the frameworks of the dominant culture and language, or if their voices are always filtered and shaped by the very systems that marginalise them. She argues that the subaltern's representation is hindered by the fact that they lack the power to represent themselves and that the existing structures of power do not recognise subaltern speech as they are co-opted or distorted, thereby further perpetuating their marginalisation (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak's work speaks to Rancière, and his analysis of the epistemic framework proposed by the "police," a framework that ultimately leads to the disqualification of racialised inhabitants' own experiences and analyses. It is only through autonomous collective action that self-confidence can be rebuilt, and this is exactly what state strategies impede through both overt and silent repression. We draw on some key elements of Rancière's work on the distinction between the police and politics as interpreted by Dikeç (2002, 2007) and Uitermark and Nicholls (2014). The latter assert that "the police order defines what is visible and sayable, what is noise and what is voice" (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Rancière describes a system of distribution of places in society that "makes forms of domination appear as if they are founded on a sensible and obvious system" (Dikeç, 2002, p. 93), which Rancière called the "partition of the sensible." Dikeç explains the latter "as a system of sensible evidence, [that] arranges the perceptive given of a situation—what is in or out, central or peripheral, audible or inaudible, visible or invisible" (p. 18). Its function is to distribute and to define who is part of the IN-siders—who is included in the centre, audible and visible—and who is part of the OUT-siders—those in the periphery, inaudible and invisible. Insiders, according to Elias and Scotson (1994), are "the established" who monopolise sources of power and use them to exclude and stigmatise "outsiders." The term we use for the outsiders is the marginalised. The "state's statements define the 'proper place' of things and people" (Dikeç, 2002, p. 95).

Politics, according to Rancière, is not the exercise of power nor the struggle for power (Dikeç, 2007); it is about the distribution of power and happens when one challenges the supposedly natural order and the place that one has been attributed in it. Furthermore, Rancière also tells us, it happens "when a wrong (denial of equality) has been identified by a subaltern group" and "when they [marginalised] make a statement of dissensus" (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Hence, politics "is the arena where the

principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by those who have no part” (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 605). By politicisation we mean the translation of anger into political claims, and by depoliticisation we mean being kept away from political influence or control, or the concealment of the political aspect of discourse. If a marginalised group is not part of the “whole,” the established interpret their claims not as efforts to build a constructive relationship, but as threats to the existing order.

1.2. Researching Silencing Using Feminist Ethnography and Interviews

This article relies on a feminist ethnography approach focussing on three main aspects: First, our commitment to documenting and analysing lived experience with an intersectional approach focusing on race, gender, class, and other socio-political aspects of people’s lives (Wilopo & Plümecke, in press). Second, linking our academic work with engagement in and with social movements (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023). Third, by taking seriously the key challenges to the practice of ethnography and Spivak’s question of whether subaltern others can be “given voice” or be listened to or understood by academics, especially without these voices being co-opted, misinterpreted, and silenced within political and scientific institutions such as the university (Craven & Davis, 2013; Schrock, 2013). A feminist ethnographic approach engages in the difficult task of focusing on the voices of intersectionally marginalised groups, such as women, Black people and people of colour, or the working class (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). This approach highlights the significance of embodiment, emotion, and spaces of intimacy, self-reflection, and positionality (Schurr & Wintzer, 2011).

It is crucial to acknowledge our positionality within feminist ethnography, understanding that while it offers insights into our social location, identities, and perspectives, it is just one aspect of our multifaceted identities (Martin et al., 2022). Both authors are part of various political groups dealing with questions of race, colonialism, and visibility. One author defines herself as a cis-gendered female middle-class person of colour who has been part of various Zurich-based migrant and BIPOC movements as well as movements against police violence. The second author is a white woman, coming from an upper-middle-class background, whose family profited economically from the European conquest of foreign and indigenous lands. She has been involved in various activist movements in France and Switzerland. Both authors have European passports. They are simultaneously allies, outsiders, and insiders as well as being in-between these political groups and academia (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and consider academia as a location from which to observe, intervene, and act against injustice (Dijkema, 2024; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

This research is inspired by the authors’ discussions, conversations, and observations in workshops, institutional debates, and public seminars on decolonisation and antiracism. We conducted in-depth interviews with movements of social and political groups, as well as city officials, who engage in antiracist and decolonial projects in Switzerland. This article is based on a convergence of two research projects: The first project is ongoing and includes observation at 14 public discussions and presentations around the topic of colonialism and racism, as well as an interview with a city official and three activists about antiracist social movements in cities. The second project is based on a research seminar at the University of Basel, “Decolonising the Swiss Urban Landscape,” involving urban explorations and interviews with activists on colonial heritage, racism, and how to decolonise the landscape. Both projects focus on racism and colonial entanglements in the urban public space and involve the group Kollektiv Vo da., who initiated a long

dialogue about racism with the City Council of the city of Zurich. Switzerland is governed under a federal system with three levels: the Confederation, the cantons, and the municipalities. The city of Zurich is a municipality and a unit of government that is run by the city parliament and the City Council, an executive government with nine elected councillors operating as a collegiate authority under the publicly elected mayor. The city of Zurich is under the supervision of the cantonal government. It has significant decision-making powers and autonomy within Switzerland's political system.

The data analysis is a continuously reflective process and was inspired by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Field notes were taken at public events and all interviews were recorded and transcribed before being coded and analysed. For this article, we chose interview excerpts and ethnographic observations that served as noteworthy illustrations of patterns of behaviour and experiences (Bejarano et al., 2019; Eriksson et al., 2012). These not only showcase distinct characteristics but also reflect occurrences found in different narratives. Public figures and representatives of organisations are not anonymised. Other participants and interviewees were given the choice of whether their statements were to be anonymised or not.

We draw on the work of the antiracist Kollektiv Vo da. in Zurich, and we follow their choice of spelling throughout this article. The collective offers critical reflections on everyday racism in Switzerland through social media and its website. It consists of Black people and people of colour, mostly born and raised in Switzerland, who face racism in their everyday lives. One of the first campaigns of the collective, which formed beginning of 2020, was to contest the use of the racist and colonial term *Mohr* (English: moor) in the names of many buildings in the old town of Zurich. Due to the level of offensiveness and its racist and colonial associations, the abbreviation "m-word" is used in this article (e.g., Darman & Schär, 2023; Nduka-Agwu & Hornscheidt, 2013). According to Arndt and Hamann (2015, p. 649), the m-word "is the oldest German term used by white people to construct black people as different" (translated by the authors). In addition, various scholars have shown that the m-word is part of a colonial and exoticizing racist iconography whose racist depictions are both hurtful and discriminatory (Aikins & Hoppe, 2011; Floyd-Wilson, 2006; Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, 2023; Terkessidis, 2021). Similarly, in their historical analysis of the depictions of the m-word on city-owned buildings in Zurich, the historians Darman and Schär (2023, p. 8) argue that:

[It represents] a demarcation that is often in the contemporary use of language referred to anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism. These forms of demarcation and racism have always been closely linked to anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, and other racisms whose origins can be traced back to the Middle Ages. (translated by the authors)

Antiracist groups explain, politicise, and debate racist terms and depictions demanding the removal and contextualisation of these terms and depictions. Nevertheless, the m-word is still being used in racist discourse by politicians, historians, and even the media (Humanrights.ch, 2021; Küng, 2023; Steinlin, 2020). This article addresses how antiracist change occurs by focusing on the struggles over the city-owned buildings with racist inscriptions located on Neumarkt 13 and Niederdorfstrasse 29 in Zurich.

2. Speaking Up Against Racism and Colonialism

In Zurich, the first debates in the City Council about the links between the city of Zurich and slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries took place in 2003, when the left-wing political party Alternative Liste handed in a motion. They invited the City Council to have historians investigate this link (Postulat 2003/13). The motion was rejected, and several new motions followed that continued to demand an inquiry into the involvement of private and public actors from Zurich in slavery, and the slave trade. What was new in the action of Kollektiv Vo da., is that the collective demanded the City Council not only to inquire into the colonial past but take action in the present city environment, by renaming place names with the m-word. These debates started just before the BLM uprising when the City decided to call for a name change for a café in a city-owned building. When the lease for the café was renewed, the public call asked potential tenants to choose a new name for Café M-kopf (café m-head) because the name was considered “outdated” (field diary, 28 March 2023). This call for a new name caused a backlash from both the public and the media. The City’s ambiguous and complex engagement with the topic of racism becomes clear through its reluctance to change the name of the building in which the café is based, which is called Zum M-tanz (to m-dance), a term that is equally racist, and a position that Kollektiv Vo da. challenged. The group sent an open letter to Katrin Gügler, the head of the Urban Development Office, requesting that not just the name of the café but also the name of the city-owned building should be changed. Kollektiv Vo da. argued that this racist term is not just “outdated” but also offensive to Black people. Dembah Fofanah, the co-founder of Kollektiv Vo da., explains in an interview that he had to pass by the café and the building as a child and see a negative depiction of a Black man and how this affected him:

The café has been there since 1980, so the café is eleven years older than I am. It means that it was already here when I was born. I can remember when I was at school, or even later when I was older. I spent time in the centre of Zurich, and I passed the café from time to time. I never went inside the café because I refused to support a café with a racist name as a silent protest, so to speak, but it had an extremely powerful effect even before I was born. I asked myself how it could be that such a café was accepted, which was always very well attended. (interview, Dembah Fofanah, 8 December 2020)

The everyday experiences of racism of Black people through the display of racial images and names can be described as visible racism that is often not seen and not spoken about by white-dominated institutions. Trepagnier (2011) emphasises how white people’s passivity feeds into “silent racism” and the production of institutional racism. The Kollektiv Vo da. stresses exactly that. The City’s answer fails to recognise Black people and people of colour as equal subjects and denies them the right to dignity in public spaces.

In its response to Kollektiv Vo da.’s open letter, the Head of the Department of Urban Planning, Katrin Gügler, acknowledged the problem of racism in the paintings and inscriptions on the houses. This acknowledgement is followed by the explanation that not every past use of the m-term points to a “crime” against Black people (Gügler, 2020). After reasoning why the history of the names should be seen as important to the City, the letter concludes that the house names are an important reminder of past attitudes:

We are aware of the racism of the past and recognise that it cannot serve as a basis for how we live together. Today, the name of the building serves as a reference, a reminder of a previously unquestioned

attitude from which we have since distanced ourselves. If we make this disappear, this discourse will no longer be possible, and contemporary racism will not disappear.

Gügler deems the house names as a reminder of the problematic history and makes a comparison with the importance of the preservation of former concentration camps. This response highlights how racism and colonialism are still perceived as historical phenomena that society has moved beyond in Switzerland (Boulila, 2019; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Michel, 2016). Referring to racism as a “previously unquestioned attitude” downplays the seriousness of racism and sends a message that such depictions are acceptable or that they are merely part of history when racism remains a serious issue today. This is a tactic that is common to not only shut down conversations on race and racism, but also neglects the voices of people who are affected by racism, and perpetuates racial discrimination through inaction.

The response also maintains that to create awareness of racism, one must maintain a constant reference to it as a reminder of its historical presence. This attitude puts whiteness and protection of white, colonial heritage in the foreground. Gügler’s comment shows that the institution’s priority is to preserve a colonial history for educational purposes, with a presumed emphasis on the white community’s learning benefit, rather than taking seriously and addressing the concerns and experiences of individuals who are affected by publicly displayed racism on city-owned buildings. Thus, it is difficult within predominately white institutions to approach colonial history and connect it to contemporary criticism of racism. Marginalised voices, realities, and feelings are thereby not heard.

3. The Importance of Social Movements

By claiming forms of written resistance, media presence, and demanding the undoing of colonial practices that produce asymmetrical power relations, while simultaneously connecting to the broader global Black community demanding to be heard, seen, and included in political processes, Kollektiv Vo da. made its voice heard. Their capacity to make racism in Switzerland visible relates to Rancière’s differentiation between “police” and “politics,” where the first defines the normative ordering of what is visible, audible, and sayable, and the second “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière, 1999, p. 30). The fact that they have been able to do so has a lot to do with the context in which they made their claims. In Switzerland, the BLM demonstrations created the discursive space to make this critique heard and put pressure on public institutions to address Switzerland’s history of colonialism and structural racism. After writing an open letter to the Social Democratic City President Corine Mauch, Kollektiv Vo da. called on other antiracist groups to contact the City and put pressure on different departments, including the City Council. The topic of racist depictions and language would not have received the same attention without Kollektiv Vo da.’s public call on their website and social media platforms to send a so-called “official public concerns request” (German: *Bevölkerungsanliegen*) straight to the president of the City Council. This prompted several dozen requests from the public demanding the removal of the racist inscriptions containing the m-word in the city of Zurich. As a result, the City Council commissioned an internal group titled RÖR (German abbreviation for “racism in public space”) to develop an inventory regarding the handling of contentious historical markers in public spaces.

The project group consisted of internal administrative staff from various municipal departments including the city archives and monument preservation, art, equality, archiving, property management, and the “interdepartmental working group on racism” (German: AG Rassismus), which was set up when the city of Zurich joined the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR) in 2007 and is led by the integration office (City of Zurich, 2023). In addition, the Kollektiv Vo da. and other antiracist groups, activists, civil society, and antiracist organisations were invited for an advisory exchange. The purpose of the meeting was to gather ideas, address challenges, and propose solutions for dealing with these depictions of the m-word as racist images in public spaces. Thus, city employees, led by the integration office, set up a meeting to hear the ideas of various groups and then wrote a report for the City Council to make suggestions for possible solutions (RÖR, 2021). The fact that the integration office oversaw organising this consultation shows that Swiss Black people and people of colour are automatically seen as what El-Tayeb (2011, 2016) called “eternal strangers.” This is exactly what Kollektiv Vo da. contests, insisting through its name (“from here”) that they are not “from there,” but that racialised people in Switzerland are part and parcel of society, and should be listened to as such. We can link this to Rancière’s (1999, p. 38) observation of confusing equality as a principle with “the empty quality of equality between anyone and everyone.” Being invited to volunteer their ideas to the city is not the same as being part of the group that writes the report and makes the decision on finding a solution to address racist terminology in public space. The latter group consisted primarily of white individuals and individuals not affected by racism, who are employed by the city of Zurich. Different activists also criticised the group for their lack of expertise in addressing anti-Black racism and for expecting free advice from antiracist groups without compensating these groups and individuals (Yuvviki Diah, activist and diversity agent, interview 28 October 2023). All activists and social groups at the meeting called for a prompt removal of the racist words. Based on their results the City Council decided to take action on two inscriptions on city-owned buildings, agreeing to put up information panels and QR-codes to inform on-site about the motivations to cover the word and the mural, explaining why this can have “a racist effect” and stating how organisations of Black people have “repeatedly emphasised that they reject terms containing the m-word as racist and demeaning” (City of Zurich, 2023). Eventually, the City Council decided to take the necessary legal steps to cover the racist words. Kollektiv Vo da.’s demand, however, is that the City fully removes the images. Additionally, other activists demanded more radical change, such as for the City to actively listen and understand their criticism about racism that is rooted and linked to structural inequality that disproportionately affects more marginalised and precarious people than the members of Kollektiv Vo da. (Yuvviki Diah, interview 28 October 2023; see also dos Santos Pinto, 2022).

Michel speaks about the “politics of postcoloniality” that Black people and people of colour engage in to expose and hold society accountable, by asking which past we want to be visible (dos Santos Pinto, 2022). In the case of the racist terminology in the city of Zurich, the expertise and the work of civil society Black activists and individuals of colour were needed to put pressure on the City to respond to the antiracist public’s demands and criticisms. They not only had to expose and speak up against racism and its effects, highlighting the crucial role of public and social movements, but also disrupt the white and “raceless” narrative of Switzerland (Boulila, 2019; dos Santos Pinto & Boulila, 2020; Michel, 2015). Through the global BLM movement, two things happened that are important for giving voice to the demands and criticism of the initiatives of Kollektiv Vo da. in Switzerland. First, it showed how important global social movements are in making racism broachable. Second, it shows how pressure from the streets is vital in revealing, creating awareness, and pushing for institutional change. The BLM movement gave local groups the possibility to link Switzerland to colonialism and racism and with the need to decolonise.

4. Whose Voices Are Heard?

Once the BLM protest reached Zurich the city government made room for marginalised voices to challenge the established order and exposed their lack of awareness, initial errors, and ignorance, while amplifying the voices they sought to silence before. While the criticism from Kollektiv Vo da. was initially not heard and listened to, their demands and knowledge were increasingly acknowledged and sought out. Kollektiv Vo da. suddenly received requests to speak about the situation of BLM in Switzerland, and even in Minnesota, where George Floyd was killed (field diary, 28 March 2023). The collective was suddenly considered to be expert on all topics that had some relation to racism and many Black people and people of colour were asked to inform both the press and institutions about race and racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952/2008) described how people of colour in the white dominant society are forced to wear a “white mask” to navigate through a predominantly white media and institutional landscape. This situation unveils intricate challenges, juggling having their own voices recognised as legitimate within prevailing power structures while struggling to articulate criticisms of these very same structures. This struggle was apparent at one of the many public talks about the m-word and racism in Zurich. The white former law professor, member of the Social Democratic Party, and Head of the National Heritage Protection Society (Heimatschutz), Killias, introduced himself as “a slave” who works for free in the Heritage Protection Association. He confidently used the m-word indicating that he dismisses the criticisms of racism connected to this term which, according to him, is a “historical material witness” (field diary, 3 May 2023). He can make his claims heard. The Zurich branch of the Heritage Society filed a successful appeal to the City’s decision to cover the racist name and mural, which had already been approved by the Building Appeals Court. The City Council filed an objection, which is still in process, about the decision to the Administrative Court. This example shows that the white former law professor can freely employ racist language, seemingly without hesitation, while it requires much greater effort and resources from Black individuals and people of colour to be heard and taken seriously and to openly address racism. This highlights an unequal societal power dynamic in which certain voices not only are given more prominence but also face more backlash when expressing their opinions in public.

The City is now forced to legally engage with racism and openly speak about the impact of racist language and colonialism. Thus, the initiative of the Kollektiv Vo da. also forced the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan city of Zurich to take an active and open antiracist stand. Black people and people of colour raised their voices against racism, enabling the Kollektiv Vo da. and their network to be part of the City’s advisory group that pressured the City to prompt change. Rancièrè (1999) would call this a process of “disidentification,” through which a marginalised group denies the position it is given in an established order, and disrupts the latter by claiming their equality against all odds. The fact that the City initiated steps to cover the racist names emphasises the potential for people who are affected to challenge the traditional divisions between those who speak and those who are spoken for, and between those who are considered capable of political action and those who are not. The antiracist initiatives to remove the m-word showed the transformative influence of marginalised and racialised groups who establish themselves as political subjects being “from here” and challenge their experiences of racism in public space.

Local antiracist groups, especially those involving illegalised non-citizens, struggle to claim belonging due to their legal status (Schilliger, 2020). Illegalised non-citizen activists highlight the link between racism, citizenship, and economic inequality, which is a more marginal and radical position than the one of Kollektiv Vo da. This dynamic is exemplified by groups consisting of illegalised non-citizens such as the Autonomie

Schule Zurich whose illegalised voices and criticism, for example about the lack of adequate housing, right to work, or police violence (Autonome Schule Zürich, 2019; Wa Baile et al., 2019) are sidelined in discussions on racism in Zurich. While solidarity exists among different activist groups in Zurich, being heard by state institutions necessitates using and voicing one's privileges, and speaking as members of society, with equal formal rights is what enabled Kollektiv Vo da. to advocate for issues that directly affect them. Despite the official acknowledgement of the impact of racist depictions, broader structural criticism, such as of the European border regime or the everyday exclusion of illegalised noncitizens, faces much greater challenges to being heard.

5. Conclusion: Inequalities and Complexities of Unsilencing

Institutions often pay lip service to critical approaches, as antiracist and decolonisation discourses and practices are encouraged in liberal environments. Kollektiv Vo da. successfully made the city government speak about their claims. Their name and efforts are stated in the City's annual reports. However, Spivak understands speaking as dialogue and points out the difficulty around hearing, listening, and understanding. Based on the empirical case study it is evident that voicing critique about racism from a decolonial perspective is challenging. The removal of the racist m-word on city-owned buildings in Zurich was neither swift nor straightforward. For institutions to start questioning racism and colonial remnants individuals must draft open letters, liaise with city officials, and mobilise a substantial network to pressure institutions. This effort is predominantly led by those directly impacted by racism, who invest emotional resources in this antiracist engagement. Engaging in institutionalised processes can harm those initiating change, perpetuating their experiences of marginalisation through being ignored, criticised, and ridiculed in public.

The involvement of antiracist groups involved city officials listening to, engaging with, and inviting people affected by racism. This challenges the traditional divisions between both those who speak and those who are spoken for and, in Rancière's terms, the division between those who are considered capable of political action and those who are not. Black people and people of colour's involvement is still limited, their labour unpaid and their voices considered as "eternal strangers" within the political system. Although the Black people and people of colour who spoke up have also planted seeds in the discourse about racism, and have experienced a collective power to name and place structural racism rooted in colonialism, decolonial and criticisms beyond removing the racist names were not heard. Removing racist and colonial words is only a small step towards the decolonisation of the urban landscape and means little without tackling the structural and material struggles around inequality, poverty, and the oppression of marginalised and racialised groups in the city. Even in a progressive, liberal, and cosmopolitan city like Zurich, there is still a difference between the willingness to speak about challenges and openly criticising and acting against racism. Institutions are not necessarily silent about race, but there is partial silencing around recognising various acts of everyday racism and colonial remnants, and connecting these with the history of colonialism that still impacts people today.

We demonstrated how Floyd's killing and the political mobilisation of the BLM movement that followed created a window of opportunity, in which the voices of racialised persons were invited into mainstream media and institutions. They seemed to find an echo, albeit limited, as the window of opportunity closed at the end of 2023 when mainstream media offered platforms for reactionary statements delegitimising postcolonial theory, calling for a strict distinction between political and academic activity.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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