

Distance

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The concept of distance typically refers to any measurement that expresses the space between two points, indicating their relative closeness or separation. These intervals can vary in length, often contrasting with the idea of proximity. In everyday language, distance can also imply separations that go beyond mere physicality, drawing attention to its comprehension in subjective terms. Thereby, within the humanities, the exploration of distance extends far beyond its measured connotations, enabling relative interpretations that encompass its diverse philosophical, social, and existential dimensions (Bullough 1957; Kasprisin 1984; Foehl 2011)

In this essay, distance is explored in relation to dis:connectivity, understood here as a concept that ‘privileges neither connective nor disconnective processes, but focuses instead on their turbulent interplay’ (Wenzlhuemer 2023, 18). Hence, distance is not juxtaposed here with its apparent antonym, *proximity*, but rather seen as part of it, echoing the notion expressed in this volume that ‘every process of interconnectedness bears elements of disentanglement and disconnection’, and vice-versa (→ **Introduction**).

Recent experiences of social distance have compelled us to focus on its physical dimension, where the dis:connections it engenders seem most intensely felt. Never have we been as affected by it as in the early 2020s, when lockdowns became necessary due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This moment heightened awareness of the consequences of distance in interpersonal relationships, while also leading to tentative forms of closeness through virtual activities such as socializing, education, and work.

In 1976 and 1977, Roland Barthes examined more positive aspects of social distance in his lecture series at the Collège de France, published under the title *How to Live Together (Comment Vivre Ensemble, 2002)*. Through literary inquiry, Barthes elaborated on the ideal distance that would allow for the harmonious coexistence of individuals in a society (Barthes 2002, 28; Bostad 2018, 169). Drawing from the lives of monks, whose routine unfolds in seclusion while they still belong to the collective institution of the monastery, he introduces the concept of ‘idiorrhymy’ (Barthes 2002, 36). This concept allows for the recognition that, even in distance, each person’s rhythms can align with those of the community, nurturing alternative modes of belonging. However, Barthes acknowledges a need for balance, as too much proximity could erode a sense of personal identity, while an excess of separation could foster loneliness and isolation.

Reflecting on experiences that extend beyond individuals to encompass entire communities leads us to transcend Barthes’ utopian views of distance, particularly when separations are triggered by acts of enforcement rather than being chosen voluntarily.

Diasporic communities, historically marked by the coerced dispersal of people from their homeland, offer valuable insights into this perspective. One example is the enduring sense of belonging through distance that has become the *leitmotif* for numerous Black artists and intellectuals who have delved into the ruptures caused by the Atlantic slave trade. Through image-making and storytelling, they subvert the trauma of the Middle Passage, embracing the idea of returning to Africa as a way to cope with the physical and emotional disconnections experienced in diasporic scattering (Hassan and Finley 2008).

As early as the 1850s, individuals like the African-American photographer Augustus Washington left the United States for a new life on the African continent. His destination was Liberia, an independent nation, founded in the first half of the 19th century, which was seen as a beacon of hope for freed black Americans. In Washington's (1854, 186) words, Liberia was a land of the free, a place where one could start anew among equals.

As argued by Brent Hayes Edwards (2001, 47), the return to the African continent, as experienced by Washington, served as a means for reweaving the separations caused by forced distancing. It allowed the exploration of the long-lasting yearning for a symbolic 'comeback' to Africa, as the territory of ancestral origins. Stuart Hall (1990), on the other hand, associates such an urge for return with a sense of belonging to an imagined community that one cannot physically inhabit. However, while acknowledging this impossibility, Hall doesn't neglect the significance of such belonging for African diasporas, nor does he deny the connections to ancestry that enable them to redefine such distances in the present. Africa, he says, 'is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the center of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked' (Hall 1990, 224). As a counterpoint to the return to the motherland, the author draws a circular route from the Americas towards Africa, and back again. Here, distances become threads of memory that weave a whole community together.

The act of symbolically embracing distances through circular return, as proposed by Stuart Hall, finds resonance in artworks like *Sea Island* (1991)¹ and *Slave Coast* (1993)² by American artist Carrie Mae Weems. In these photographic series, Weems portrays continuous journeys between the coastal islands of the southern United States and the fortresses of West Africa, such as Elmina Castle (Ghana) and the Maison des Esclaves (Senegal), where enslaved individuals were forcibly taken from the continent. By doing so, the artist shifts away from the disconnections associated with the cartographies of Atlantic slavery, advancing representations of proximity in diasporic imagery.

¹ For a reproduction of a work from the *Sea Island* Series (1991), see the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum, <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/40737/>

² For a reproduction of a work from the *Slave Coast* Series (1993), see the collection of Yale University Art Gallery, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/79257>

This approach has been fruitful not only in the visual arts but across various mediums. In literature, for example, *En attendant le bonheur* (*Heremakhonon*) — the first novel by writer Maryse Condé ([1976] 1988) — embodies the narrative of ancestral memory, aiming to bridge both emotional and tangible distances in the life of its protagonist, Véronica Mercier. In this novel, Mercier is a Guadeloupean teacher living in Paris in the 1970s who embarks on her first trip to Africa in search of the past experiences of her ancestors. ‘What did we do here before? [. . .] How were we supposed to live? Eat, sleep, look after the children. . .? Who will tell me?’, Mercier asks herself. And, without hesitation, she continues: ‘No one. Because no one really knows [. . .] This is why I’m here. To try to see what was there before’ (Condé [1976] 1988, 143).

When the possibility of returning is not on the horizon for those who were forcibly distanced from their homeland, or when there are no communal discourses to symbolically elaborate on such a past, the experience of distance takes on a different complexion. To further explore this aspect, we can turn to the histories of individuals who, as subjects of scientific inquiry, crossed the Atlantic in a different direction to that of enslaved Africans — namely, from the Americas to Europe.

It is well documented that, from the 16th century onwards, explorers of the so-called New World took human beings away to Europe as evidence of scientific discovery and colonial power. Ethnographer Christian Feest (2022, 1) notes that in the 1820s, at least seven Indigenes from Brazil were living in Europe. Some resided on the premises of noble families while others were publicly exhibited in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. One notable example is that of a Krenak man named Joaquim Kuêk, who was brought from Brazil to Germany in 1818, along with the ethnographic collections gathered by naturalist Maximilian Alexander Wied-Neuwied (Feest 2022, 5).

Around this same period, another case stands out. Two Indigenous children were taken from the Amazon to Munich following the completion of a Brazilian expedition led by Bavarian scientists Johann Baptist von Spix and Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, between 1817 and 1820. These children, named Isabella Miranha and Johann Juri, after their Christian baptism, survived the crossing of the Atlantic and arrived in Munich, in December 1820, only to succumb to severe illnesses some months later. Their deaths prompted Queen Caroline of Baden to commission, in 1824, a posthumous tribute in the form of funerary relief by the bronze caster Johann Baptist Stiglmaier (Fig. 1)³. The piece depicts Juri and Miranha lying down in a serene pose, while an old man in the upper right corner blows strongly over their bodies. According to historian Maria de Fátima Costa (2019, 15), the gravestone was inscribed as follows: ‘Taken from their homeland, they found care and love in the

³ This bronze plaque is part of the collections of the Münchner Stadtmuseum, and it was part of the exhibition “Travelling back: Reframing a 19th-century Expedition from Munich to Brazil”, presented at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (Munich), from February to April 2024.

distant place of the world, however; the relentless and hostile wind of the north took them away.' Distance, in this case, proved to be irreversible and deadly.

This history was reimagined by writer Micheliny Verunschik in the novel *O Som do Rugido da Onça* (The Sound of the Jaguar's Roar, 2021). Through fiction, the book examines the experience of isolation felt by Isabella Miranha in distant Munich. Verunschik invites readers to explore vulnerable moments such as how Isabella — renamed by the writer as Iñe-ê — must have felt, as a young adolescent, when her first period arrived, and she was not able to participate in the communal rites of passage of her Miranha relatives. 'To the blood flow, Iñe-ê reacts with fear. The place where a girl menstruates becomes sacred, and there, in that dark and cold room, she will not perform the ritual of blood, nor will she have her mother or grandmother to teach her what needs to be learned', writes Verunschik (2021, 82).

Echoing Saidiya Hartman's (2008, 11) methodology of 'critical fabulation', Verunschik recurs to imagination to bridge the gaps within archives, where 'arrangements of power obscure the very object we seek to recover' (Hartman 2008, 11). The author dares to build a *récit* from the void of silence, illuminating what was overshadowed by the histories and monuments that, for almost two centuries, paid tribute to Spix and Martius. By doing so, she encourages us to consider absence as an invitation to resignify the disconnectivities that make up these 'impossible stories' (Hartman 2008, 10) (→ **Absences**).

Verunschik's work engages in dialogue with artistic practices such as the performance *Urban Bodies* (2023), directed by choreographer Yolanda Gutierrez (Fig. 2). In this piece, movements and body expressions are deployed by dancers to revive the presence of Juri and Miranha in contemporary Munich. Through Gutierrez's work, moments of joy and playfulness are afforded to the children, as if they could once again, or for the first time, inhabit childhood moments that were forbidden by their abduction⁴.

What appears particularly relevant here is that neither the silences nor the absences or separations hinder philosophy, art, or literature from challenging the ruptures they entail. Through critical thought and creative work, such ruptures are reinterpreted and subverted, allowing the emergence of perspectives that surpass distance as an expression of fragmentation. By transcending binary oppositions, such as near versus far, presence versus absence, distance versus proximity, we are prompted to explore the interplay between these elements and acknowledge their potential to coexist or even complement each other.

4 For more references on Yolanda Gutiérrez work, see the artist's website, https://www.yolanda-gutierrez.de/files/detail_tableE.php?seite=4&folge=54&id=103, and the photos of her performance by Felix Ehlers published at Static #2.2 (2023): 138–139, <https://static.ub.uni-muenchen.de/index.php/static/issue/view/7/6>.



Fig. 1: Johann Baptist Stiglmaier. Funerary relief of Juri and Miranha (around 1824). Bronze, 40 cm x 48 cm, Munich City Museum, Applied Arts Collection.



Fig. 2: Yolanda Gutierrez. *Urban Bodies: Munich* (2023). Photo: Felix Ehlers.

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