

Tabou or the (Im)possibility of Conclusion

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“Now the stars appear and the Night dreams
Leaning on that hill of clouds, dressed in its long, milky pagne.
The roofs of the huts shine tenderly. What are they saying
So secretly to the stars? Inside, the fire dies out
In the closeness of sour and sweet smells.”

— Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Night in Sine*, 1998 (1990)

In “Black Orpheus,” Jean-Paul Sartre’s seminal preface to the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, edited by Leopold Sédar-Senghor, the spectre of justice rises as dark underground shadows call for the right to carve their dispossession in the collective memory. Sartre invokes the poetry of Orpheus and the figure of falling darkness to address the blackness, the exhausted colour of diaspora, of colonization, of invisibility. He speaks of an element of discontinuity when addressing the double exile of past and present, for what Fred Moten denounces as “fugitivity”: Or, in Moten’s words, “owning the underprivilege of being sentenced to this gift of constant escaping.”¹

A scene of obliteration requires first determination, the general process of classifying form by any given name. But *formalization*—the ultimate ground for civilizational narrative, or, in other words, history—is rehearsed in accounts of ethical statements that operate as a determining force². A radical encounter with memory is thus an encounter with the determinacy that has historically occluded the violence of expropriation, colonial domination as settlement and displacement and of property as enslavement. Dispossessed across past and present narrative tenses, the elapsed, the disremembered, the enslaved exist as objects of history and of a seemingly irreparable past.

Memory operates beyond the historical canon. What unfolds into apprehension in this movement is the capacity for humans to feel the materiality of time beyond their own existence. Pedro A.H. Paixão conceives the past in a plane of experience, the past as narrative tense for that which remains open and overflows into present and future. Continuously emerging, the past, symbolic at all levels, has the potential to unearth erstwhile inequities solving them, in memory form, in the collective consciousness.³

An incantatory space, Paixão’s drawings explore visual but also sensitive experiences rescuing their ignitable presence from mere chronicles. Figures appear against the modern background of portraiture, gazing at us, now viewers and voyeurs, as interlocutors between visual memory, remembrance and repair. At once sleeping and awake, the figures are rescued from the night terrors of dark eternity, where historical truth has been understood as self-luminous and brightness a deterrent against obscurity. These are the looks of the past in the future, the looks of the future in our present.

As Sartre notes,

“the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen; he was only a look—the light from his eyes drew each thing out of the shadow of its birth; the whiteness of his skin was another look, condensed

¹ Fred Moten, *Black Optimism/Black Operation*, 2017, Lecture at untitled event, University of Chicago, p.3

² Denise Ferreira da Silva, *On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value* in e-flux journal #79, February 2017. Online.

³ Pedro A.H. Paixão. 2013. *O Pensamento Como Espaço De Criação: Estudos Das Noções De «Disciplina», «Medium» E «Práticas» Na Relação Entre A Filosofia E O Desenho*. Ph.D, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto p.125-135

light. The white man—white because he was man, white like daylight, white like truth, white like virtue—lighted up the creation like a torch and unveiled the secret white essence of beings. Today, these black men are looking at us, and our gaze comes back to our own eyes;”⁴

Paixão is known for his dedicated bright red drawings that, beyond all necessity and all possibility, have in the last two decades located the exigency of repair by returning, in remembrance and experience, to the strain. In *Tabou*, a new series of large format drawings, *Open Letter (young George Washington Williams as Patrice Lumumba)* and *The Birth of Drawing as well as Two painters in a transit camp (Luc Tuymans and Kerry James Marshall)* (all 2017) confronts the viewer and voyeur with the inextricable rhythm of interlocution: these gazes look back to the disjointed history of politics, the expropriation of self-determinacy, the objectification of desire, the uncertainty of the canon, all in all they gaze at the impossibility of concluding the past.

A smaller series of turquoise blue drawings point to a moment of the Pan-African revolution in its painful discovery of its own contradictions, tasks and real possibilities. Such is the *The Big Wave Rider* (2017) the capturing of Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961) in image after liberation that would become the sorrowful symbol for the legacy of a counter-hegemonic movement that was alienated from its common loyalty. A new series of graphite drawings turn the subconscious into a *force majeure* as simultaneously destructive and constructive encounters with the canon of art history.

Introduced in English, and later put into French by colonial agents, *Tabou*, a derivative of the Togan word ‘forbidden,’ is a unique sensitive patch of remembrance, of undoing the undone, of foregrounding memory as drawing and formalizing it as experience to the conscious mind. Departing from Sartre and Senghor’s poetry to rescue the silenced memories of the past, in *Tabou*, Paixão’s drawings place under consideration “the cunning silence of Europe’s night...”⁵

Sofia Lemos

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Patrice Lumumba, during the Belgo-Congolese Round
Table Conference held in Brussels.
Photographed by Harry Pot on January 26, 1960.
(Nationaal Archief Fotocollectie Anefo)



⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus in Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, Paris: PUF, 1948. p.13

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14