



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Birds | 2017 | Joaquim Arena

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EUROPE, PERIPHERY OF THE CREOLE ISLANDS

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Working from their shared standpoint of the colonial condition and legacy of slavery on Martinique, in the French Antilles, the philosophers Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant all thought deeply about how social reality constitutes us all. Their own experiences as mestizo/black men and



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their movement through Europe (and especially France) as students and workers were very important to their work. So too was the experience of World War II, which, for all its devastating effects, was decisive for liberation movements, and the emancipation of the colonized world. Beginning from the legacies of slavery, these philosophers interpreted South America, the Caribbean, Cuba and Central America. They destabilized colonial narratives about those spaces, reinterrogating them from their own soil, bodies, people and subjectivities.

In their distinctive ways, in the full flush of mid-century anti-colonial discourse, they brought this violent heritage to bear on their declarations of resistance and their struggle for human dignity. The activation of this heritage unites their work, the meaning of their lives and the message they have left to future generations. This goal also underpins a letter Aimé Césaire wrote to the mayor of Fort-de-France, the Martinican capital, in which he proposed a museum of his ideas, work and relations. Today this space is a study – based on Césaire’s own study in Fort-de-France’s town hall – where visitors can see his furniture, personal objects, work and the first editions of *Tropiques* and *Présence Africaine*. There are also works by his friends, including the painter Wilfredo Lam’s ‘Madame Lumumba’, as Césaire christened the canvas, after Patrice Lumumba was assassinated in 1961.

The *Centre Caribéen d’Expressions et de Mémoire de la Traite et de l’Esclavage (Mémorial ACTe)* (Caribbean Centre of Expression and Memory of Slavery and the Slave Trade, the ACTe Memorial) in Pointe-à-Pitre, the capital of Guadeloupe, another island in the French Antilles, is also in line with this overarching logic and is a manifestation of their ambition. In the words of Victorin Lubel, MP and president of the Regional Council, which appear on the museum’s website: “We, the heirs and children of Guadeloupe, witnesses and actors in this history, must create a new humanism and bring understanding and fraternity to men. These are not vain words, in a world or societies in crisis, but rather a prayer, an incantation, an act: to gather, to witness, to remember, to build, and to join together to avoid forgetting, so that the worst moments in history will not be repeated tomorrow. This is what the ACTe Memorial stands for and testifies to.” ⁽¹⁾

Opened in May 2015, the ACTe Memorial is probably one of the most astonishing museums to address the issue of trafficking and slavery as part of contemporary memory rather than only as a historical fact. Conceived under the direction of the Regional Council by a multinational and multidisciplinary team, the museum is made up of several spaces. Of these, I want to highlight the genealogical research



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centre, where families can go to find something both profoundly private and public: their own name, and through that, their family's traces on the island.

The museum has access to between 6000 and 8000 Guadeloupean family trees and documents from most available public and private archives. The act of restoring identity is fundamental to beginning to tell the history of the island and of the long historical moment of which its inhabitants are heirs. This story is also told in the other space I want to draw attention to, the permanent exhibition. Through various means, it offers an immersive insight into the processes of slavery, segregation and racism. An audio guide accompanies visitors as they walk through an exhibition boldly presented as a stage set. They encounter video projections, interactive pictures, scenes, animated films and archival objects. The visitors' journey is punctuated by the interventions of contemporary artists from the Americas and Africa who repeatedly bring us back to the present, to contemporary legacies, memories and realities of slavery. These interventions are undoubtedly one of the ways the exhibition most directly appeals to us to take responsibility for the history its exhibits narrate. Appealing, too, is the attention the exhibition gives to distinct subjectivities and everyday experience, to the search for part-real part-mythical personal histories, alongside resistance through individual and collective struggle. The museum articulates, also, the constant oscillation between Guadeloupe and the Caribbean and the global dimension of the slave trade.

The exhibition is made up of 37 islands, thematically and chronologically regrouped into 6 archipelagos, that show us the eras and themes of slavery, from antiquity to the present day. The invention of the Americas with the arrival of the Europeans; the beginnings of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade; the time of slavery; the time of abolition; post-abolitionism and migration; segregation policies; civil rights struggles and the return to the promised African land; colonization and decolonization, and the changing aesthetics of blackness. The permanent exhibition ends with slavery today, denouncing the fact that 36 million people remain enslaved. This reminds us once again that slavery is a present-day problem, both in its continued existence in reality, and in human memory.⁽²⁾

It is important, however, to note a concern raised by the historian Amzat Boukari-Yabara, who has family roots in Martinique and Benin: "the Caribbean Centre of Expression and Memory of Slavery and the Slave Trade (the Memorial ACTe) in Guadeloupe (French Antilles), reaffirms the idea of slavery as a distant memory that directly excludes French European territory, from which the whole slave



enterprise was organized.”⁽³⁾ This observation of the difficulty Europe has in addressing its history is also highly pertinent to the latest work of the Cape Verdean and Portuguese writer, Joaquim Arena, *Debaixo da nossa Pele – Uma Viagem* (2017; *Under Our Skin - A Journey*). The book calls on us to reflect on the presence of black people, and particularly slaves, in Portugal and in Europe. Originally from Cape Verde, an archipelago deeply marked by trafficking, slavery and migration, Joaquim Arena embarked on an Afro-European path carved out by European children of African migrants who grew up and lived in Europe. For this group, their (partly fictionalised) memory of their African experience is part of their European identity. Many European artists have walked down this path, such as the Briton Johny Pitts and the Flemish Belgian John K Cobra (Roland Gunst), among many others. Mixing biography, past, present and future, reality and fiction, they propose a paradigmatic rupture in the reading of European history, no longer confined to its continental territorial limits, and not just narrated from the perspective of the powerful, but also from the perspective of minority groups. These groups carry silenced, hidden or alternative narratives, in which Africa is present and becomes part of European countries, and Europe in general.

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The opening scene of *Debaixo da nossa Pele – Uma viagem* is an academic meeting about black presence in Lisbon. The narrator’s attention is caught up in Leopoldina, a retired secondary school teacher, who, in her speech, addresses the topic with admirable gusto. But soon we learn the import of the narrator’s trip, through an explanation about why he, a Cape Verdean, was invited. It becomes clear that he is on a personal and philosophical journey, a meditation on his identity and on the trajectory of his immigrant family. That journey encapsulates the history of their native country and of a global mestizo and black diaspora. Leopoldina’s speech addresses the well-known Portuguese renaissance paintings (which have been discussed recently) which affirm historical black presence in the centre of Lisbon. In the book, these paintings become the pretext for a tour of the city, where the narrator grew up. Leopoldina initially leads this tour and, in the Tropical Garden - a remnant of the Portuguese World Exhibition of 1940 - reveals to the narrator her own interest in the subject: she is a descendant of slaves. And so another trip arises that derails the first: a pilgrimage along the river Sado in search of traces of the descendants of black slaves brought to that area in the 18th century to cultivate rice. This history is inseparable from the lives of other black Europeans and from her own life as a mestizo, heir to scars, diasporas and encounters that are caught in hidden stories and silenced, scattered fragments, clues and ghosts.



I stare at my shadow, my brief insignificant silhouette, in this landscape, as I imagine the itinerary of this man's ancestors, probably African slaves. [...] There is no better place to interrogate identity, grandeur, and the human condition than a river, for nothing is more imperfect than its flow, more uncertain and innocent than its colour." (4)

And it is from this reflection along the river near the fantasmatic villages that he is looking for - São Romão and Rio de Moinhos - that the narrator laboriously weaves a web of images, stories and myths in which emerge local slaves, servants, mestizo families and well-known historical black characters present in Europe from Portugal to Russia. This web shows us that, in Europe, slavery, colonialism and decolonization are borderless, from the fifteenth century to the establishment of Cape Verdean immigrants in the 1960s. Parading before our eyes are scattered lives, fragmented families, glories and misfortunes that were all at one point devalued, discriminated against and suffered prejudice. Again, their history is told through the narrator's family, itself scattered throughout the world, dispersed from their native land. This one family stands for the historical and intercontinental movements of people who were either taken against their will or swept up in circuits of emigration linked to poverty, underdevelopment and war. These movements generated new identities. They are stories from which the narrator takes on the ambiguities of the discourses of negritude and whiteness, racism and anti-racism, the plasticity of discrimination, the trap of stereotype, and the awareness of prejudice. These are stories that point us to a common past made up of very different memories.

Debaixo da nossa Pele, the artwork of many other Afro-Europeans, journalistic pieces by Joana Gorjão, the concept underlying the "Testimonies of Slavery - African Memory" trail through Lisbon's archives and museums (5) and *Mémorial ACTe* are all artistic, narrative and curatorial proposals still seeking an audience. They are indexes of a complex Europe shedding itself of the past, decolonizing itself from its own former colonies, freeing itself from the images of the ex-colonizer and ex-colonized. They are therefore signs of a Europe that, in revising its own narrative, gets closer to those creole islands themselves, and ponders another future.



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- (1) “Nous devons, nous les héritiers et enfants de la Guadeloupe, témoins et acteurs de l’histoire, créer un nouvel humanisme, porter l’entente et la fraternité des hommes. Ce ne sont pas des mots inutiles, face à un monde ou des sociétés en crise, mais une prière, une incantation, une action : rassembler, témoigner, se souvenir, construire, s’inscrire pour éviter l’oubli et pour que demain les pires moments de l’histoire ne se répètent plus. Voilà le sens et le témoignage du Mémorial ACTe”. Assisible with more information the museum’s website: <http://memorial-acte.fr/> Accessed 31 August 2018.
- (2) Cf Assisible information on the museum’s website: <http://memorial-acte.fr/> Accessed 31 August 2018.
- (3) Amzat Boukari-Yabara, “Contornos Pan-Africanos das Memórias Pós-Coloniais”, “Encarte Memoirs”, *Público*, 14 September, 2018, p. 14.
- (4) Joaquim Arena, *Debaixo da Nossa Pele - Uma Viagem*, Lisboa: INCM, 2017, p. 164.
- (5) Conceived by the Lisbon Studies Office, under the aegis of “Passado e Presente. Lisboa Capital Ibero-Americana da Cultura. [“Past and Present. Lisbon, Ibero-American Capital of Culture”]. See *Testemunhos da Escravatura - Memória Africana* - <http://testemunhosdaescravatura.pt/pt>. Accessed 31 August 2018.
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