



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

Saturday, 22 June 2019



Pico do Areeiro #1 - Madeira | 2008 | Cristina Ataíde (courtesy of the artist)

EUROPEAN MASKS

Felipe Cammaert

In contemporary Europe, several decades after the end of colonialism, racism continues in many social spaces of a continent that still struggles to face up to its imperial past. News of racist episodes abounds. The growing presence of parties of the extreme right in Europe (as shown by, among other things, the recent European election results) has encouraged exclusionary discourses and behaviours by some citizens against others. I would like to briefly discuss two such episodes which have taken place in very distinct parts of society with very different contexts. In spite of their differences I think these two cases both raise the question of the very idea of citizenship in 21st century Europe.

The first episode took place a few months ago in Paris and provoked a sharp reaction in the French cultural world, specifically in the performing arts. Included in the programme of the Festival *Les Dionysies*, dedicated to Greek tragedy, was a version of *The Suppliants*, by Aeschylus. It was to be directed by the playwright and director Philippe Brunet, a university professor and a noted specialist on Aeschylus. The opening night was scheduled for the 25th of March, in the Richelieu auditorium at the University of the Sorbonne. It was boycotted by anti-racist activists belonging to various French organizations. The characters of the Danaïdes (daughters of the Egyptian king Danaus) were to be represented using black masks. According to the protestors this would constitute a form of blackface. In the end the play was only put on, after a [vigorous debate](#), at the end of May. In the Classical Greek theatrical tradition the Danaïdes are women of Greek origin “with skin darkened by the sun of the Nile”, who arrive in Argos (Greece) seeking refuge from persecution by their cousins, the sons of the king of Egypt.

Louis-Georges Tin, president of CRAN (*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires*), a council of black associations which took part in the action at the Sorbonne, defended the boycott. He argued, in an interview with [Le Monde](#), that, taking into account the history of the representation of black people in Western art, the use of black masks to represent the Danaïdes was a case of “unconscious *blackface*” (1). This argument encourages us to ask ourselves if any representation of a person made by another person of a different ethnic origin (in this case, African / Egyptian), can constitute a case of racial discrimination. The argument is not new; we might think, for instance, of the [controversy](#) about the character of Othello being played by white actors.

After the initial cancellation of *The Suppliants* at the Sorbonne Anne-Sophie Noel, a professor of Ancient Greek literature, wrote an [opinion piece](#) for *Le Monde*. She argued convincingly that it was anachronistic to characterize as blackface all representations of the “Other” in the Classical theatrical tradition which used masks to symbolize difference. Moreover, Noel suggested, in *The Suppliants* Aeschylus “incorporates into Greek civilization the contributions of Egypt and the Orient without erasing cultural differences”. She adds that “there has been renewed interest in the play in recent years because it expresses clearly and forcefully the idea of the right of the stranger to hospitality”.

Beyond the question of the confrontation between traditional Western culture and the historical reality of the oppression of black peoples, what interests me here are the implications of these kinds of actions by anti-racist associations in terms of the construction of a post-colonial Europe that can

recognize its own past of exploitation and repression of colonized peoples. In my opinion, it is one thing to disguise oneself or make oneself up as black (with the conscious or unconscious intention to ridicule or amuse), and it is another thing to represent, with masks, cultural differences proper to the Greek theatrical tradition. Philippe Brunet, who has in the past put on plays in Africa, with African actors, [said](#): “I have always worked to show the importance of Africa in the Greek tradition [...] we can’t cut ourselves off from Africa. We are profoundly African. Herodotus tells us this”.

The second episode took place far from the stage and the Richelieu auditorium. It happened in a football stadium, where racism continues to be common. On the 2nd of April the young Italian player Moise Kean, born in the Piedmont region to parents of Ivorian heritage, was subject to racial discrimination during a game in the Italian league. After 85 minutes the new star of the Italian team scored a goal which secured victory for Juventus against a weak Cagliari side, from Sardinia. After having suffered racist insults throughout the game, Kean celebrated his goal in front of the local fans. He stood still as a statue for a few seconds, his face blank and still, like a mask, with his arms extended and a defiant glare, until the other players – including his own team – pushed him away.

The most concerning element of this situation, in addition to the abject behaviour of the fans, was the reaction of all those around the young player: the Juventus coach, Allegri, advised him to “respect the opponent”; the captain of the team, Bonucci, said initially that the blame was shared between the fans who chanted “monkey” and the young striker for having reacted to their provocations (Bonucci later [moderated](#) his initial statements); the Italian sports justice authorities decided in May that the behaviour of the Cagliari fans didn’t merit any [sanction](#) since the racist insults only arose as a consequence of the young Italian player’s celebration.

In contrast, Lilian Thuram, a former French national player and a well-known anti-racist activist, along with his foundation, [Éducation Contre le Racisme](#), was extremely critical. He called out the indifference and lack of solidarity from the European football world. In a long interview, Thuram (who will come to Portugal at the invitation of the MEMOIRS project this coming November) [said](#), among other things: “what has Kean done to deserve these monkey chants? To arouse such contempt? [...] Bonucci’s reaction is as violent as the monkey chants. [...] These monkey chants demonstrate contempt for all black people, for all children who are the same colour as Kean”.

Why does Europe (still) have such trouble showing a coherent attitude in the face of discourses which legitimate racism and xenophobia? What are the masks that stop it from accepting its colonial past and understanding, once and for all, that diasporas are part of the richness of the European cultural map? Will the “old continent” ever be capable of reconciling its glorious cultural legacy (including Greek theatre, put in its historical context) with its – much less glorious – colonial past? Will Europe, in other words, be able to overcome the “colonial fracture” (Blanchard *et al.*) and conceive of a new “Ship of Europe” in which it would be possible “to decolonize the decolonizer and their image, and to decolonize the decolonized and their image”? (2) Moise Kean (whose father still does not have Italian nationality, and declares that he votes for the Liga Nord) is frequently asked if he feels Italian. “I don’t feel it”, [he has said](#), “I am Italian”. These are the real masks that still have to fall in Europe.

(1) The theme of the representation of black people in the arts has been dealt with a number of times in this space, both by members of the project team at MEMOIRS and by external collaborators. See, for instance, the MEMOIRS newsletters 22, 25, 30, 47, 48 and 52, [available here](#).

(2) Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, “A Casa da Nave Europa – miragens ou projeções pós-coloniais?”, in: António Sousa Ribeiro; Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (org.), *Geometrias da memória: configurações pós-coloniais*, Porto: Afrontamento, 2016, p. 25. [Available here](#).

Translated by **Archie Davies**

4

Felipe Cammaert is a researcher on the project MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Post-memories (ERC Consolidator Grant, no. 648624) in the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. He is also a translator of French and Portuguese and of contemporary Latin American Authors.

ISSN 2184-2566

MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.