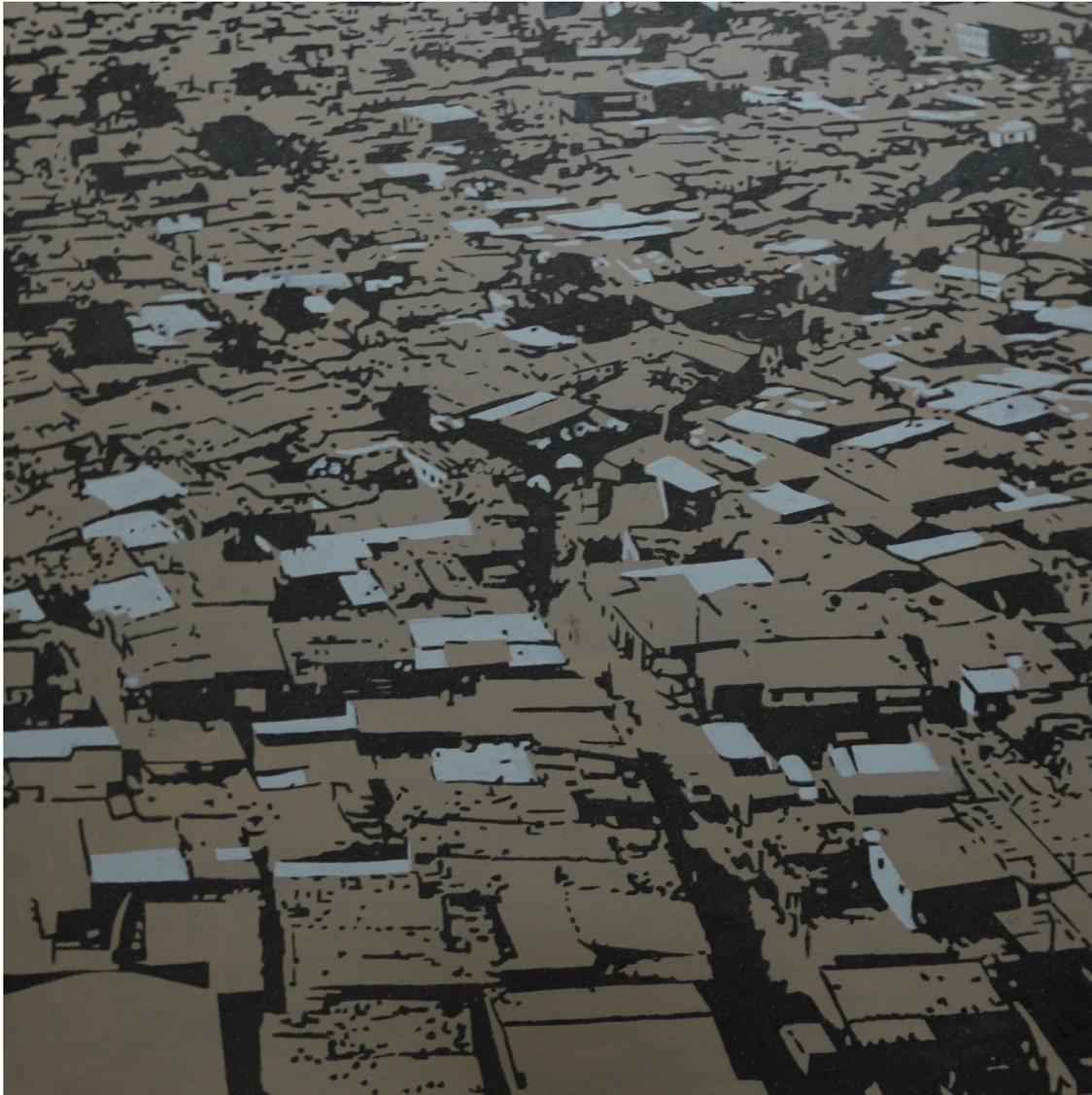




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Landscape 1 | 2018 | [Ihosvanny Cisneros](#) (courtesy of the artist and MOVART gallery)

RELIVING THE FATHER'S WAR: THE END OF VIOLENCE?

Felipe Cammaert



In the literature of post-memory, the trope of the absent father emerges when the persistence of post-colonial trauma through generations is in question. In Portugal, the novel *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* [Strange War of Common Use], by Paulo Faria, constitutes perhaps the best example of this [post-mortem dialogue](#) exploring the transmission of the father's experience of war to the son. However, there are also works in which the son relives the father's traumatic past from the inside out, through writing that dwells on the details of past conflicts. In these cases, the narrator privileges scenes from a violent past to recount the story of the father's war as if they were there in his place.

The recent book by the French writer Thierry Crouzet, *Mon père, ce tueur* [My father, the killer], is a revealing example of how fiction becomes the scene of colonial conflict for the child. Crouzet's father, called Jim in the novel, fought in the Algerian war as a conscript in the French army. Until his father's death, Thierry Crouzet had written detective stories, erotic novels and various other scientific and cultural writings. But, thanks to the pervasive presence of Jim's past in Algeria, Crouzet decided to set out on a process of archival research with various documents and memory objects (including accounts and photographs of his father, veterans' websites and historical works) in order to reconstitute a silenced history. "With his death, Jim gave me the right to remember" (p.21), says the narrator, identifying autobiographically with the author (1).

The unread letter: the Pandora's box of violence

Before dying, Jim left "a killer's note" (p.11), that the narrator does not dare to open throughout the novel. It is, therefore, an unread letter; or at least, in a classic novelistic trope, it remains unread while the novel is being written (and read). The letter constitutes at once the point of rupture with the past and the justification for the son's cathartic exercise:

Today, while memory rebuilds itself, I remain incapable of opening Jim's letter [...] If I am not careful, that violence can pass through Jim and me to reshape my own children with the same inglorious effects. I must make a break with my familial identity. Reconstruct. (p.26)

Writing becomes a way of bringing an end to the violent past identified with the dead father. It becomes an attempt to draw a line under the transmission of a violence born in the context of colonial war. Instead of opening the letter, then, the narrator prefers to (re)write Jim's Algerian experience. That is, to recreate the past through fiction: "I must return to the origins of the violence" (p.49) he affirms, as if he was Conrad's character travelling through the Congo to find the heart of darkness.



The novel also addresses the fear that the letter will transmit Jim's violent character: Jim's "desire to make me his successor, as he had succeeded his own father" (p.91). If, on the one hand, the letter seems to contain within it the essence of the trauma associated with the war in Algeria, on the other hand, writing the history of the father is figured as an attempt to reconstruct identity on the part of a son of the French colonial empire. In other words, the letter is the Pandora's box of a colonial violence that the son wants not merely to understand, but above all to block; to stop it being transmitted to him and his own children.

Writing violence: subsuming the father through fiction

When the narrative arrives at the moment when the father is confronted, on the border between Algeria and Morocco, with the act of killing, the son tries to put himself in his father's place: "however, I must put myself in Jim's place, to feel with him the shaking that took over his body and mind [...] 'I am a murderer, I can start again, change my name, I am Jim'" (p.130). Crouzet's book is a powerful instance of the "passing of testimony" (Coquio), in which the desire of the inheritor of memory for direct testimony materializes in the space of writing, at the confluence between father and son. In this case, it is the search for the origins of violence: "I can only get near him now he is gone. I am there with him in his GMC truck, with his comrades. I set off with them." (p.136) (2).

But the attempt to appropriate the memory of the father is partially a failure for the narrator of *Mon père, ce tueur*: "I did not know how to get to him, but he did not know how to renounce his role as Jim to come to me [...] I was still just me, he had become Jim" (p.131). However, the impossibility of subsuming the figure of the dead father through writing does not imply the total interruption of the transmission of the past. In the same moment of transitory identification between father and son, the latter confesses to having inherited, in spite of himself, his father's (and his mother's) violence. He concludes: "I channelled it into writing. In writing, I try to capture the monster that wants to escape from its cage" (p.133).

In one of the most lucid passages of the novel, Crouzet's narrator reflects on the power of writing for individual catharsis:

In initiating me into hunting, Jim tried to offer his own solution for ending this congenital violence. I did not want his medicine. I adopted another: writing. If most authors begin their careers by settling their scores with the past, I wrote to deny that past. I spoke of everything except my own



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bad experiences. I wrote to survive, to bury the monster inside myself. Thirty years of struggle would pass before I dared write about my father” (p.186)

The writing of trauma as a form of therapy is an omnipresent theme in the literature of war (we need only remember the early books by António Lobo Antunes). However, in this case, thanks to the possibilities of fiction, catharsis is produced at the level of the inheritor of the traumatic experience, “the witness of witness”.

Seen through the prism of post-memory, writing emerges in Crouzet’s book as a form of violence through which he will end up perpetuating and transmitting the colonial trauma in a different way. The final sentences of the book seem to demonstrate the impossibility, for the son, of completely erasing the memory of violence associated with the father:

“I set out on this work of memory to break with my heredity and all I did was reinforce it. Instead of cursing it, I celebrate it. The more I quake in front of it, the more delighted I am by its shocking dimensions. There must be a deep well of perversion inside us” (p.214).

(1) Thierry Crouzet, *Mon père, ce tueur*, Paris, La Manufacture des Livres, 2019. The translations from the novel are by Archie Davies

(2) Among other things, Paulo Faria develops this question of the ownership of experience in literary works of post-memory, as I have argued [here](#).

Translated by Archie Davies

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