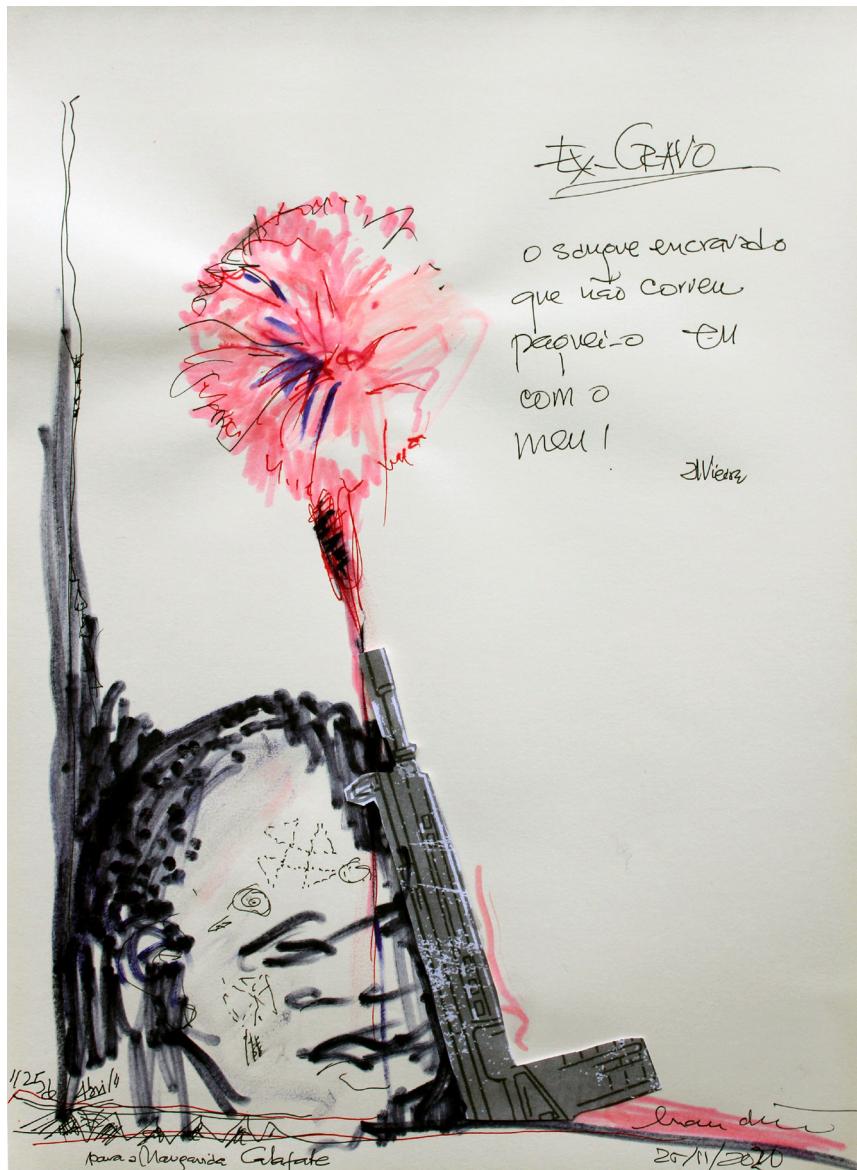




MEMOIRS - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 22 May 2021

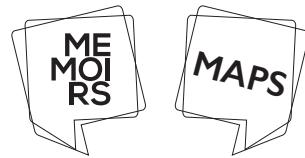


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THE GARDEN OF THE EMPIRE SQUARE AND THE FAITHFUL GARDENERS OF COLONIALISM

Bruno Sena Martins



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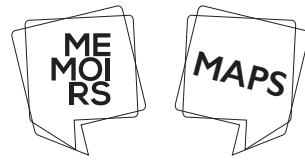
It was in the first months of 2021, the year when space exploration entered a new phase with the landing of Perseverance on Mars, when the garden of the “Praça do Império” in Lisbon surfaced in the public debate in the wake of a lively controversy. Taking into account the turmoil that the year 2020 brought to street furniture of colonial-revivalist taste, to the evident annoyance of doves already accustomed to the statues of Robert E. Lee, Cecil Rhodes, Christopher Columbus or Edward Colston, we would perhaps expect an outbreak of critical revisit to the vast monumental decoration left over from the Exhibition of the Portuguese World of 1940.

Since history occurs in waves and unsuspected counterwaves, as we have known for a long time, the protests that gained new impetus and visibility with the transnational notoriety of Black Lives Matter would end up in Portugal in the form of an affective appeal to the reestablishment of floral coats of arms. We mean, in this case, the coats of arms in boxwood in which the Portuguese colonies were represented, initially set up in 1961 on the occasion of a national exhibition of floriculture.

When reading the petition that called for the Lisbon municipal administration to invest necessary resources in the floral representation of imperial Portugal, I soon remembered a text by Father António Vieira (1) (incidentally, also “honored” in 2018 in the same city in a statue, one has to say, of a dishearteningly paternalistic conception).⁽²⁾ In fact, I traveled to the said text of António Vieira by the hand of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. In a reflection on Amerindian thought, the Brazilian anthropologist pondered on the exasperation of Father António Vieira in the face of the inconstancy of the indigenous peoples converted to Christianity.⁽³⁾ That is, despite the determination of the Jesuits to uproot the indigenous people from their cultures and beliefs so that they prostrate themselves to the light of Christ, they always returned to the “barbaric customs of the heathens”. It is in this sense that Father António Vieira distinguishes the marble statues, characteristic of the nations given to firmness in the faith, from the myrtle statues, which would be characteristic of the Amerindian soul:

There are other nations, on the other hand - and these are those of Brazil - who receive all that they are taught with great docility and ease, without arguing, without countering, without doubting, without resisting; but they are statues of myrtle which, once the gardener lifts up his hand and scissors, soon they lose their new form, and return to the old and natural bruteness, and to be weeds as they once were.

The distinction between the marble statues and the myrtle statues, ingeniously mobilized by Father António Vieira to reflect on the misadventures of forced conversion, is actually very useful to think about how memorial horizons are materialized in light of what Jay Winter (2017) designates as “frameworks



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of memory".(4) We mean the languages and the iconographies that make up the memorial horizons through which the dominant representations of the past are laboriously inscribed in the collective memories within disputed or reinstalled frames of meaning in each generation. As the images of the fallen statues of Stalin, Sadam Hussein or Cecil Rhodes prove, memory inscribed on marble is as precarious as memory inscribed on myrtle.

The petition calling for the replacement of the coats of arms of the colonies expresses, to some extent, the precariousness of the only world in which its subscribers imagine themselves to exist: the one drawn by the colonial epic and belatedly nuanced of generous Lusotropicalism. The despair of Father António Vieira before indigenous people who "even after believing, are unbelievers" was translated in the call for a constant work of gardening that would prevent the indigenous to see, hear and walk according to their ancestral will:

Their master must always watch over these statues: once, that he cuts off what sprouts from their eyes, that they may believe what they do not see, again that he restrains what sprouts from their ears, lest they listen to the words of their ancestors; again, that he cuts off what sprouts from their feet, that they may abstain from the barbarous acts and customs of the heathens. And only in this way, always working against the nature of the stem and the mood of the roots, can the unnatural form and the composure of the branches be preserved in these plants.

To the chagrin of the master-gardeners of the former capital of the empire, the "inconstancy of the indigenous soul" was and will be the self-determination of those who refuse to be shaped by the colonial-racist power. It is worth remembering that the carnations of April would not have existed without this precious determination.

Translated by António Sousa Ribeiro

(1) "Sermon of the Holy Spirit" (1657).

(2) Widely known as a master of the Portuguese language and a "defender of the Indians", less known for having advocated, for example, the replacement of indigenous labor by African slaves, having even idealized in 1679 the creation of the Monopoly Company of Maranhão with the objective of providing the local settlers with 10 thousand black slaves.

(3) Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2002), *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem e Outros Ensaios de Antropologia*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify.

(4) Winter, Jay (2017), *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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