



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

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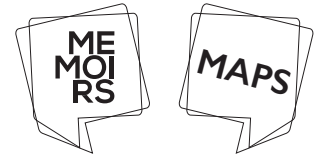


Image from video "Ciclo Perpétuo" | 2021 | César Schofield Cardoso (courtesy of the artist)

“PERPETUAL CYCLE”: (RE)APPEARING MEMORIES AND DECOLONIAL PRACTICES IN TARRAFAL, CAPE VERDE

Sofia Lovegrove

The former prison of Tarrafal in Cape Verde was created in 1936 by the Estado Novo dictatorship for Portuguese political prisoners. It closed in 1954 and reopened in 1961 to imprison those connected to anti-colonial movements in Portugal's then African colonies. A third, lesser-known period of use occurred between 1974 and 1975. The Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974, which marked the end of the Portuguese fascist and colonial regime, triggered a dispute between the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde) and its local rivals to take control of Cape Verde, leading the PAIGC to reopen Tarrafal in December 1974 to imprison its opponents. Most of the prisoners were released by May 1975, and in July the prison closed permanently. (1) According to Cape Verdean



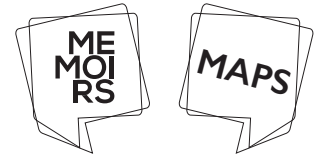
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artist César Schofield Cardoso, the years between 1974 and 1979 represent a difficult time in the history of the country, due to political instability and partial resistance to independence, leading to violence against those regarded as enemies by the PAIGC. Many of those involved are still alive, contributing, according to Cardoso, to a “black hole” or general amnesia regarding this period. (2)

Today, Tarrafal is a museum and national heritage site, and since 2004, it was added to UNESCO’s Tentative List of World Heritage Sites. Besides supporting the creation and development of this museum, in 2019, Portugal announced it would help Cape Verde in the application of Tarrafal to UNESCO. Restoration of the site’s physical structures were recently completed, carried out by a Portuguese company, and on 5 July, the governments of Cape Verde and Portugal [will sign a memorandum of understanding](#) regarding the application of this historical space to UNESCO.

As Amy Sodaro argues, rather than engaging openly and critically with violent pasts, memorial museums - such as Tarrafal - tend more frequently to reflect the political regimes that created them, and which become legitimised by them. (3) Tarrafal incorporates a variety of memories of different groups: Portuguese anti-fascists, African anti-colonialists, “enemies” of the PAIGC, and others whose experiences were less directly, yet related to this site, such as the Portuguese and African guards, local communities and those who live today in some of the buildings that were once part of the prison complex. However, the official narrative produced by the Cape Verdean authorities that manage the site focuses only on the political prisoners of the first and second phases, and is characterised by a selectivity and simplification centred around the mnemonic tropes of resistance and victimhood in relation to the Estado Novo dictatorship. The histories of colonial exploitation and imprisonment in Africa are downplayed compared to those of the Second World War and other European fascist regimes. These narratives, and the close involvement of the Portuguese, seem to show that Tarrafal is being instrumentalised by Cape Verdean authorities to assert their (cultural and political) proximity to Portugal, and by the Portuguese government to reassert its representational hold in its former colony.

This is in line with a narrative shift (following political changes) that has been taking place in Cape Verde especially since the 2000s, characterised by the recovery of a lusotropicalist narrative that highlights the “creole” identity of the country and its racial and cultural proximity to Portugal, while silencing its violent colonial past. (4) The official narrative produced in and about Tarrafal reinforces this silence and that around the immediate post-independence period. These silences are critiqued by several Cape Verdean scholars, activists and artists whose works attempt to trouble the dominant

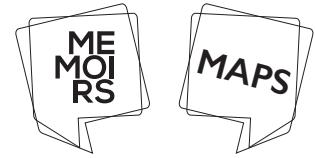


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narratives. Cardoso is one such artist who aims to salvage the African heritage of Cape Verde, while reflecting on the country’s past and contemporary condition. Cardoso was one of the artists whose work was presented at the exhibition “A Glimmer of Freedom”, curated by Marzia Bruno, and shown at Tarrafal in 2017. During this exhibition, Cardoso presented his audio-visual series Rust, which sought to question the status of Tarrafal, by contextualising it and “reflecting on the social and cultural measures that the government of Cape Verde intends to implement for [and since then has implemented at] the site”. This series included three installations: Perpetual Cycle, Surrounding Seas, and Hard Water, which articulate a connection between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. (5)

The focus here is on the silent short video shown in the Perpetual Cycle installation, projected on the wall of a cell, which can still be watched on the [artist’s website](#). In this work, Cardoso overlaps three videos that represent contrasting realities: the left-hand side mostly shows archival images of white Portuguese, while the other presents archival and more recent-looking video snippets that overlap, showing mainly black individuals. While the left side shows Portuguese engaging in leisurely activities, the images on the right show men and women working in dry fields, an allusion to Cape Verde’s harsh environment, and wearing simple clothes that contrast with those of the Portuguese, highlighting the extreme wealth discrepancies of the colonial period. The images of the Portuguese, mostly from the Portuguese National Television Archive, presumably dated to pre-1974 and located mainly in Angola, include texts that read, for instance: “(...) the Portuguese have always mixed with the Africans”, together with images of black and white children playing together. It continues: “these Sunday scenes, rare in Africa, represent the essence of Portuguese policies here: the development of a genuinely multiracial society” (author’s translation). Such historical visual and textual narratives reveal the lusotropicalist mentality and discourse of the end of the Estado Novo dictatorship. The contrast between this narrative and the simultaneous images of black individuals working tells the viewer that the other, silenced side of the regime’s official narrative was the violence imposed upon black bodies.

The video on the left then shows what seem to be mixed families, and images of black and white children at school, framed by the text: “of all the European colonisers, the Portuguese were the less sensitive to colour. They have a saying that goes: God created the white and the black, the Portuguese created the ‘mulato’ ” (or mixed person). At this point, the images on both sides overlap the background that shows images of Tarrafal in recent times. The latter occupy the entire breadth of the screen, and show Tarrafal from the outside, where one can see locals carrying large buckets of water, perhaps alluding to current practices and/or the ongoing harsh climatic and economic conditions of Cape Verde.



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The images on the left and right then shift towards showing only black people at work, including the text: “not only men were forced to work, their children were also made to do it, in coffee plantations, not being able to attend school”, following a description of the bad conditions in which they were made to live. The video ends with images of white Portuguese people attending mass, while black people continue to work the fields on the other side of the screen.

Through such contrasting images, the artist brings into one space contrasting realities and narratives: the official discourses of the Estado Novo dictatorship and the experiences of white Portuguese set against the harsh realities of black individuals in the colonies. By incorporating recent images of Tarrafal in the film and given the location of this exhibition, the artist creates a sense of continuity, and seems to articulate the idea that the realities and narratives of the colonial period live on in Cape Verde today, and Tarrafal more specifically. On his website, Cardoso states that “Tarrafal is a symbol of terror and resistance, [hence its] status of Resistance Museum in the present days. Nevertheless the poor population occupying the camp after its closement is push away [sic], for the sake of tourism and a clean museum”. These communities could be seen as represented in his video by the locals walking near Tarrafal. Prestige and economic gains appear to be more relevant for the authorities, as seen in the ongoing application of Tarrafal to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Cardoso concludes by adding that his series *Rust* calls for an awareness of past and present terror. As Ana Nolasco argues, the archival images are used by the artist as tools for questioning contemporary Cape Verdean society, where traces of the Estado Novo’s lusotropicalist narrative remain alive today, namely in the celebration of the “creole” identity of Cape Verde. (6)

While the title of the series, *Rust*, seems to speak of the way in which things of the past endure as ruins in the present, *Perpetual Cycle* seems to refer to the way coloniality, both physical and epistemic, lives on today through the dominant national narratives in Cape Verde, and in contemporary heritage and memory practices which, as seen at Tarrafal, work to downplay the violence of the colonial past, and to exclude local communities. By generating a dialogue between official colonial narratives and the harsh realities of the colonised, and between past and present at and through Tarrafal, Cardoso sheds light - literally and figuratively - on how the representations of history and past and present identity of Cape Verde lead to a silencing of memories, and to the exclusion of Cape Verdeans in the present. If black holes absorb light, Cardoso’s pieces work to restore visibility upon histories, memories and experiences made invisible by the authorities and the dominant narratives they (re)produce. His work, for making memories and contemporary realities *appear*, offers alternative truths to the official narratives: that the victims of Portuguese colonialism and of the musealisation of Tarrafal, and the

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silences imposed on them, *matter*. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, if *to appear* is to matter, to *make appear* is to claim the right to exist. Cardoso’s Perpetual Cycle, in creating a “space of appearance” (7), and in articulating alternative narratives, can thus be seen as a decolonial practice. Although created in 2017, its enduring online presence remains relevant given the hold of coloniality in Cape Verde today.

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(6) Nolasco, A. (2019). Postproduction, Archive and Memory in the work of César Schofield Cardoso. *Journal of Contemporary African Art*. 44, 94-107.
(7) Mirzoeff, N. (2017). [The Appearance of Black Lives Matter](#). Miami: Name. Accessed online on 3 November 2020.
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Sofia Lovegrove is programme officer of the International Heritage Cooperation programme of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, and research associate at the Research Centre for Material Culture. Her research focuses on the durabilities of coloniality in the present, both in their material and epistemic forms, with a special focus on the Portuguese context.

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