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Catch Me, If You Can!

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MASP Afterall

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Art and descolonization

Afterall and Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) are working together to explore new artistic and curatorial practices that explicitly question and critique colonial legacies in art, curation and critical art writing. The project Art and descolonization is building a critical forum for cultural theorists, curators and artists to raise questions and formulate proposals for the reinterpretation of exhibitions and museum collections in non-canonical ways by promoting workshops, seminars and publishing essays. It is intended that the events promoted by this collaboration will stimulate further discussion and research on decolonization, de-colonial and post-colonial studies.



TESSA MARS
Rèv libète, rèv lanmò
[Dream of freedom, dream
of death], 2016
Cortesia da artista

Catch Me, If You Can!

NANA ADUSEI-POKU

1. AVEDON, R.; BALDWIN, J. *Nothing Personal*. New York: Atheneum, 1964.

2. By taking this argument as a fact, I consider this text already disobedient to academic rules of citation, particularly as a Black academic I had to “back up” every experience-based argument that I try to present, because these experiences would challenge the normative system, which was imposed on me. Thus the presented arguments and observations derive from being in the university system as a student as well as a professional for over 10 years.

It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within. And yet, the terror within is far truer and far more powerful than any of our labels: the labels change, the terror is constant. And this terror has something to do with that irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself as being, which is, however and by definition, a provisional self—and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits.

JAMES BALDWIN, 19641

That contemporary universities and art schools are criticised for the reproduction of a Western (art) canon is nothing new and that those higher (art) education institutions consist of a predominantly privileged white student body is not a novelty either. It is therefore not my aim to reproduce these debates and claims but they should be considered a given throughout this short essay.² For the past two decades, the same institutions have tried to change this condition, but have not really known how to do so, except by initiating diversity policies aimed at “inclusion” and “equal opportunities” that constantly problematise (prospective) students of colour whilst forgetting the multiplicity of other intersecting identity categories. In order to complicate the question of “how”, my primary aim is to point out the role of time as a political tool to reproduce a hegemonic education system and the connected argument is that there is no “catching up”, which calls the decolonisation of state institutions and their education system into question.

3. HANCHARD, M., "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora". *Public Culture*, v. 11, n. 1, 1999, p. 252.

4. There are of course many other scholars who have looked at chronopolitics. With regards to colonialism and modernity: see references to FABIAN, J. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; BHABHA, H. K. "Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity". In: ASHCROFT, B.; GRIFFITHS, G.; TIFFIN, H. (eds.). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 219-23. With regards to labour: BLOCH, E. "Die Erbschaft dieser Zeit". In: *Gesamtausgabe*. v. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961. With regards to sexuality and gender: HALBERSTAM, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, Sexual Cultures*. New York: New York University Press, 2005; DINSHAW, Carolyn et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, v. 13, n. 2, 2007, pp. 177-95; LORENZ, R., "II. Transtemporal Drag". In: *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012, pp. 93-118.

The argument derives from my observation that we are facing a form of *strategic temporal disjuncture*, which can be seen as the aftermath of century-long white and hetero-sexist hegemony. The notion of "*strategic temporal disjuncture*" derives from the historian Michael Hanchard³ who describes the way in which time has been used as a political tool in order to deprive Black people from knowledge, goods as well as subjecthood.⁴ During segregation, apartheid and colonialism for instance, white schools would receive with the latest versions of school books which years later would be handed over to black schools and thus create unfair conditions for Black individuals. He also points out that time management was imposed on enslaved human beings by the people who owned them. Hence temporal deferrals, time management or even the determination of our biographies into a (hetero-)normative narrative are all connected to the ways in which politics—or in other words policing, disciplining and controlling—has been used in order to create the uneven power structures, access and exclusion that most institutions are confronted with, which is a common theme in the discussion around decolonisation.

I want to point out that today's *strategic temporal disjuncture* systematically hinders society's abilities to change because of static outdated knowledge production and thus ideologically reproduces long-established power hierarchies. In other words this disjuncture produces historical and cultural amnesia and is a driving force in order to nourish an exclusive progress narrative. Working against this amnesia can not solely work through action plans and equal opportunities, because that does not change the dominant content, which sustains and reproduces itself. On the content level however, teaching Visual Culture, Critical Race, Gender, Queer and Post-colonial Theory constantly challenges lecturers to fill these knowledge-gaps in the classrooms that the dominant Western and Eurocentric canon has (re)produced for more than a century. We are always facing the long-term problems which the education system produces, by not privileging expansive and holistic learning but exclusive self-congratulatory learning environments. So the state of our museums can not be a surprise because they are fuelled by the very same system. Curating exhibitions in the European context with a Black radical approach is thus a very difficult act, because of the absence of these discourses in mainstream cultures. One option is to fall into the trap of anthropological framing or to be disobedient and not translate the discourse at all.

5. WHITE, E. J. *Modernity, Freedom, and the African Diaspora: Dublin, New Orleans, Paris*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

6. AHMED, S. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 54.

7. I don't want to undermine the historical and contemporary importance of these Institutes and Departments, quite the opposite, my intention is rather to point out that the scholarship and knowledge from these fields should be more acknowledged and implemented.

So where to begin? This is a question that I am often facing, when I want to talk about the discourses that scholars and artists of colour currently discuss such as Black Ontologies, The Physics of Blackness, Afropessimism vs Afrooptimism or the post-black art debate. I have no grounds upon which to start, because the students have neither been exposed to the basis of these discourses nor can these discourses be understood as easy accessible theory because they contain the most advanced philosophical debates we have at our common disposal.

"But these are very specific subjects, they do not affect us": this is one of the arguments for this exclusion, that I encounter. In particular when it comes to scholars and arts from the Black Diaspora, it is often argued that "*their* problems do not matter to us", or "it is a completely different context and identity does not matter anyway".

When we consider Europe and the United States, if not the entire world as the site of postcoloniality, how is such an argument even possible? When thousands of refugees land on the shores of Europe⁵ trying to escape the aftermath of the uneven economic power relations that colonialism and exploitation have produced? How can an understanding of oneself begin through the exclusion of an understanding of the historical and contemporary circumstances that have let us come into being with all our situatedness in the first place? So what is at stake when thinkers and artists of colour are included in the general theory and art programs? What is at stake when traditions, perspectives and value systems change and individuals are allowed to start to reflect on the complexity of the entirety of our societies and their subjects? Somehow the answer lies in this last question, because the exclusion seems necessary in order to maintain and recreate white supremacist power structures, that disguise themselves behind an unmotivated desire for diversity and revisions to the curricula through institutional speech acts and policies⁶— which nobody even wants to read but that conveniently remain unchallenged.

Despite the fact that most of the fields such as Gender and Sexuality Studies, Black and African American Studies are institutionalised at universities, I am arguing that the departmentalisation of these fields helps to maintain the *status quo*,⁷ which results in students and teachers arguing that "these matters do not concern us".

So it is indeed possible to gain access to this knowledge but mostly in specialised Master Courses and summer

8. SANER, P.; SEEFRANZ, C. *Making Differences: Swiss Art Schools, Exploratory Study*. Zurich: Institute for Art Education/ Zurich University of Arts, 2012.

9. HARNEY, S.; MOTEN, F. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. London: Minor Compositions, 2013, p. 29.

10. WYNTER, S. "No Humans Involved: A Letter to my Colleagues". *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, v. 1, n. 1 (outono), 1994, pp. 42-73.

11. MCROBBIE, Angela. "Stuart Hall: Art and the Politics of Black Cultural Production". *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 115, n. 4, 2015, pp. 665-83.

schools or in self-organised reading groups. Whilst many institutions desire diversity⁸ and confuse the term with race and see it as the reformative basis—the closing of the knowledge time-gap, which includes a self-reflective mode—this seems to be one of the greatest challenges.

Because it is not only the students who need to make time-warp jumps—they are the least problem when it comes to an eagerness to learn; what appears as a much greater problem is the body of teachers and directors, who do not have the expertise to teach the required content because they have equally not been exposed to it during their education. However a groundbreaking decolonising of our education system needs this expertise as well as a student body that starts to understand that they are part of the problem and thus the solution.⁹ Sylvia Wynter already argued for such a transformative mode when she wrote a letter to her colleagues in which she highlighted the intrinsic role and responsibility of educators in the reproduction of ideological, epistemological, symbolic and physical violence.¹⁰ If you re-read Black, Feminist and Queer Activists over the past century, they all claim the same form of inclusion and acknowledgement, which seems to be a humanism, which is always in the making but never hits the production line.

The problem is of course more complex, because although content seems to be set in stone in most university curricula, and here in particular the conservative disciplines such as art history, philosophy or economics etc., the education system has equally changed and turned into a neo-liberal labour machine. Art schools and universities have to constantly reinvent themselves. Today we look at the entrepreneurial university which, according to Angela McRobbie "entails relentless and hubristic forms of self-promotion".¹¹

In the European context—with EU research grants such as Horizon 2020 which is all about developing neoliberal futures, entrepreneurial and business-oriented research—it is questionable how and for whom this future is designed and whether this future is rather just a reproduction of the *status quo*. Thus it is no surprise that it is more important today in contemporary art schools to give the students lessons in entrepreneurship than in non Western and diasporic art.

Research that tries to dismantle and change such institutional power-structures is systematically prolonged or circumvented through minimal funding and non supportive infrastructures, not to mention the emotional blisters and

12. HARNEY, S.; MOTEN, F., 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

exhaustion, that individuals in this field experience. One jeopardises one's livelihood—if the critique one poses is not formed through negligence. But is it really David against Goliath? What happens through this continual fight for inclusion and representation is a desire to remove oneself, one's knowledge and intellectual production altogether from this space, which turns into a radical escapism and refuge into—what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the *Undercommons* of the university. They write: "To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons".¹² The temporal dimension of the *Undercommons* is one of synchronicity, because Harney and Moten compare the *Undercommons* to Maroon culture, which exists parallel to the dominant system, which is not about critique but in my interpretation about survival. It is a place of refusal to participate and a place which is not in interaction or dialogue with the system, that forces us into the refuge. A place where one can ask what do I want because of myself?¹³ It is a heterotopic place which allows to think possibilities in a system, which sustains itself unless it is completely destroyed and replaced by something still unthinkable different. If we start with that question, we come to very different results compared to policies, business-oriented research or inclusive action plans, because we also negotiate and ask ourselves on a day-to-day basis about our own practices within this closed economy of thought. The latter question to me is only the beginning point of a holistic transgressive temporal performative approach, which goes beyond the institutions that we are working in.

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