

Fire, Anger and Humiliation in the Museum. By Françoise Vergès, 2019

Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge. Audre Lorde, 1982

On 2 September 2018, the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro was destroyed by fire, losing perhaps 90% of its vast historical and scientific holdings, including an important collection of indigenous art, and recordings of now-extinct languages. It^[L] was revealed that firefighters had not been able^[L,SEP] to access enough water, ladders or equipment,^[L,SEP] that the museum had no sprinkler system and was not insured. It was unsurprising to many that the Brazilian elite, heirs of the owners of vast estates built on the dispossession of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans, had no interest in adequately funding the museum. The government has shown indifference, contempt and ignorance towards the complex history of its country, and the ideology of racial democracy has masked a long history of repression, racism, exploitation and military dictatorship. There is a connection to be made between the loss of hundreds of thousand of objects and the spoliation of lands and destruction of the environment – the fire stands as a metaphor for a conception of the past governed by forgetfulness and erasure. The problem is global: financial neoliberalism sees the world's resources as limitless. As Kader Attia has explained, injuries – to people, to communities, to the environment – no longer need to be repaired; they are not acknowledged, they are asked to disappear.

What do we do when only ashes remain and there are not even fragments left to repair? In the aftermath^[L,SEP] of the museum's devastation, a group of graduate students launched a campaign to retrieve traces of the collection through images and videos taken by visitors throughout the years. This would create a new collection in which the lost objects could be evoked through images, clips and sounds charged with feelings – a 'museum of emotions'. The campaign echoes many themes important to Attia, who deals with scars, injury and repair, traces and the memory of objects. His work acknowledges that emotions are stubborn, they make themselves known, disrupting – through contradictory feelings of anger, shame, humiliation, responsibility, desire to escape the past – the narrative of pacification provided by neoliberalist consumerism. In the video installation *Reason's Oxymorons* (2015; p. 61) Attia shows psychologists and other experts discussing the trauma engendered by colonial legacies of devastation and dispossession, and how this has been passed through generations, affecting even those born long after the end of the colonial period. Hence, the importance of the 'notion

of humiliation' (1) in his practice in relation to colonial trauma, despite claims in Europe that 'we' should get over it. This is why this trauma must still be analysed as it was in the mid-twentieth century by Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, a piece of work renewed by Algerian-French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Karima Lazali in her 2018 book, *Le trauma colonial*. Both the French and the Algerian State, Lazali argues, have an interest in keeping colonialism in the realm of the *unthought*: that which cannot be thought, formulated or expressed. She looks at colonial and postcolonial processes that have produced a succession of mutilations of names, bodies and memories that work to alienate the subject from itself. (2) Violence replaces words. The 'intractable' situation identified by Fanon in the 1950s not only cast its shadow on the present but has been compounded by the policies of the postcolonial state. (3) Scars upon scars, injuries upon injuries, humiliations upon humiliations, dissimulated, masked, covered by lies, misappropriations and false truths. Lazali writes that the postcolonial state's heroic narrative is a camouflage concealing a fratricide war; the present is the past and the confusion of times forecloses any possibility of a future.

This is where Attia's work intervenes. He shows the scars, the need for the wounded to exhibit their injuries, and the ways in which they have been repaired – 'unfinished' to Western eyes who look for the artifice of perfect erasure. Interviewing psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, as well as indigenous therapists, Attia's seeks to explore colonial humiliation and injury and their lasting effects. Whereas in Western museums entire staff painstakingly restore statues, paintings and objects, returning them to what they declare to be their 'authentic' state, in works such as *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) Attia creates the art of the *repaired injury*, of the *visible scar* and in doing so offers us a museum of emotions. In writings such as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965), Fanon looked at the ways in which trances and cleansing rituals done collectively allowed an individual to escape a body occupied and stultified by colonialism; protected by the community, they got rid of their persecuting internal demons, ghosts and specters. We could say that Attia's work encourages a similar process by inviting the collective spectators to embrace those who bear colonial scars; in fact, all the humiliations inflicted by any kind of abusive power. For humiliation to be overcome, for wounds to heal, the injuries must first be shown and their histories listened to.

Contrary to systems that seek to erase or neglect, conceal or disguise, Kader Attia discloses, lays bare, divulges. Where Western obsession with repair delves into fakery

and disguises, Kader Attia offers substance and unease. Objects stolen in the colonies tell multiple stories, of dispossession and uprooting, of forms of display and the history of violence, humiliation and scars. In his art, Kader Attia reveals the skilful art of dissimulation still practiced in most Western museums, especially when it comes to the legacies of colonialism, and in doing so, contributes to the ongoing debate about decolonising the museum and the status of the object.

1 Kader Attia in conversation with Ralph Rugoff in this volume, p. 13

2 Karima Lazali, *Le trauma colonial. Une enquête sur les effets psychiques et politiques contemporains de l'oppression coloniale en Algérie* (Colonial Trauma: An Inquiry into the Psychological and Political Effects Today of Colonial Oppression in Algeria) (Paris: La Découverte, 2018), p. 8. Our translation.

Ibid., p. 11

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