Saturday, 30 January 2021

Lisette Lombé, in *Black Words*, Brussels, Arbre | 2018 | courtesy of the artist

PATRICE LUMUMBA, 60 YEARS AFTER

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

The 17th of January 2021 marks the 60th anniversary of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of independent Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo) and one of the great African leaders of the Sixties. The historical significance of this murder entails local, regional and global factors that range from internal rivalries and complicities to the importance of Congo as a reality and an image in Africa; from the context of African countries struggling for independence to power conflicts among

the colonizing powers; from the relationships among the ones and the others in the context of the Cold War, whose consequences make themselves felt until today. As a matter of fact, this was a murder announced by a speech in the day of independence.

On June 30th 1960, at the ceremony of proclamation of the independence of the Congo, there were three speeches: by king Baudouin of Belgium, the former colonizing power, by the president of Congo, Joseph Kasavubu, and by Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister, the latter in an intervention that was not foreseen in the initial protocol. It was a short speech of some 12 minutes, written in accessible and incisive, performative and visual language, a speech that, as historian Jean Omasombo Tshonda argues, "founds the independent Congo".(1) The first eight minutes are the clearest definition of what colonialism is from the point of view of a continent, a country, a community, a person.

For Lumumba, that which was at stake with decolonization brought about by independence, which the new world order that had emerged from World War II had offered as a promise and had been called for by the Conference of Bandung, in 1955, was the launching of a new understanding of the world that might radically reimagine relationships among persons, peoples, communities, and states. The promise was the struggle, for what was at stake was not something which was only national, but which concerned the whole continent and all oppressed peoples. "The independence of the Congo marks a decisive step towards the liberation of the whole continent."(2) And, in reality, the impact of this speech was national, continental and world-wide, and even today the metamorphoses of this transnational and transcontinental history have ramifications in a whole range of sectors in public and private life of contemporary European and African societies, expressing themselves in a renewed need to adjectivize the word decolonization - of the mind, of the imaginary, of being, of knowledge, of the arts, narratives, spaces, people.

The short life of Patrice Lumumba, and of so many other African fighters who were murdered and imprisoned in the beginning of what was thought to be the beginning of the road to liberation, clearly reveals how colonialism prolongs itself in decolonization, casts its shadow on independence and haunts the postcolonial. In the same year of 1960, Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of independent Congo, would be placed in house arrest, in September, would be captured in November, and, on January 8th, would write his last letter to his wife, Pauline, nine days before his assassination, on January 17th 1961. In the letter he acknowledges the permanence of the old world of colonialism in the process of metamorphosizing into neocolonialism, in defense of the white stronghold in Southern Africa, of which

his imprisonment is the expression, together with the new world borne out of the Second World War, with the Congo he represents as one of the locations of serious conflict of the Cold War in Africa. The murder of Lumumba exposes the steps undertaken by Cold War politics in the continent, executed by Lumumba's Congolese rivals and by Belgian army officers, with the approval of the United States and the surveillance of the CIA, in its strategy of combat to communist action in the world with the Soviet Union as a protagonist, and in its solid historical relation to Belgium concerning the exploitation of resources in the "colony". But, in this letter, Lumumba also asserts his confidence in the final victory of the continent:

> We are not alone. Africa, Asia and all free peoples will always align with the millions of Congolese who will not give up their fight as long as the colonialists and their mercenaries remain in our country.

Two images will remain in the collective imaginary: the image of the young prime minister, the triumphant leader of the speech of independence, concerning everybody and representing the new world; the image of Patrice Lumumba with his hands tied behind his back, surrounded by military and, with them, the symbol of a future still ensnared by the colonial hand, marking the suffering visage of the leader, and, with him, of the whole Congolese people and all the peoples oppressed by an old world. And he ends his letter to Pauline with a view to the future generations:

> One day, history will pronounce its verdict, but this will not be the history being taught in Brussels, Paris, Washington, or in the United Nations; it will be one that will be taught in the countries which have been liberated from the yoke of colonialism and its puppets.

45 years after Patrice Lumumba's speech and a very active neocolonialism, Belgium would open a parliamentary inquiry to the death of Patrice Lumumba, to which the publication of the books by Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, in 1998, and, in 1999, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, by Ludo De Witte, provided a contribution.

The timid conclusion corresponds to what everybody knew and nobody formulated: the "moral" entanglement of Belgium in the assassination of the young leader, confirming the words of his

comrade in arms, Amílcar Cabral, written in February 1961, in his text "Lumumba died so that Africa may live".(3) In 2002, there followed formal apologies by the Belgian state to the family of Patrice Lumumba and, thus, the "public secret" (4) that had long haunted Belgium started to unveil itself, with all phantasmatic images of a young Congolese prime minister assassinated with his companions, dismembered and dissolved in acid, with just two teeth remaining, and the support of Belgium to the hideous dictator Mobutu who would rule over Congo for decades. Thus, there arose the possibility that, one day, another story would also be told to all Belgians and all Europeans, and the process of decolonization would follow its path in Africa and in Europe. This is what we continue to witness today.

In 2018, the name of Patrice Lumumba was given to a small square in Brussels, in April 2019, the then Belgian prime minister, Charles Michel, addressed a formal apology to Belgian half-breeds stolen from their African mothers and interned in Belgian institutions during the colonial period, we witnessed the long law suit by the children of Patrice Lumumba, concerning the devolution of the remains of their father, and also, in the framework of actions by the movement Black Lives Matter, to the decisive interventions on the statues of king Leopold II, someone who epitomizes the brutal memory of colonial Belgium which Patrice Lumumba has described in his speech. The words in this speech are taken up by Pitcho Womba Konga, the Belgian performer, actor and rapper, in his play *Kuzikiliza* (2017), a title which, translated from Swahili, means "to make oneself heard". In the performance, the actor creates conditions for his speech, written by Lumumba's words, to be listened to, putting forward its actuality and the stages of the colonization to be fulfilled. In one of her poems, pronounced in postcolonial Belgium, where both artists live, the poet and slammer Lizette Lombé also actualizes the words of Lumumba. In this way, Patrice Lumuba's postmemory today places his words on top of prolonged silences.

Who will forget?

That, to a negro, one said *you*...

Certainly not as to a friend

But because the honourable *madam* was reserved to whites only.

Who will forget?

They told me

You are a nigger! A big monkey! A cockroach!

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They told me

You are a filthy raghead!

Your mother fucked with a negro! You are a bastard!

They told me

You should return to your country! To your bush!

To your hut!

Climb back to your tree! Your creeper! Your bananas!

You should thank Belgium for having accepted you!

Even if you were born here...

Who will forget?

That, to a negro, one said *you*...

[...]

Who will forget? (5)

None of both artists lived through the period of colonialism in the Congo, not even the official period of decolonisation, but their speeches show us that the colonial act did not end with those who practiced it and with the historical framework that led to political independence, nor has decolonisation been fulfilled in its fullness of restitution.

On June 30th 2020, Philippe, the king of the Belgians, who is now the age of the independent Congo, recognised for the first time the pain and humiliation inflicted on the Congolese people and their extensions into the present, in a letter to the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Félix Tshisekedi. In his words: "I wish to express my deepest sorrow for the wounds of the past, the suffering and humiliations inflicted on the Congolese people whose pain is now rekindled by the discrimination still present in our societies." (6) On the same day, Patrice Lumumba's daughter, Juliana Lumumba, addressed the King of the Belgians requesting that her father's remains be returned to her family and to the Congo.

60 years after the speech of Patrice Lumumba that founded the Congo and condemned its author, the king of the Belgians approaches, in a semantically and politically dialogical way, the speech of

Patrice Lumumba and opens a process of revisiting history, archives and memory, proposing a Truth, Reconciliation and Restitution Commission. At the same time, and through the judicial and royal system, Belgium will return to Patrice Lumumba's family the remains, which one of the Belgian officers involved in the murder had kept for himself in a ghastly way and which have long haunted the Belgian imagination. In this national environment of great change, but also of global awareness of the impact of the brutal past on our present, which the Black Lives Matter movement represents, and following the resolution of the Brussels Parliament in April 2019 favouring the repatriation of human remains and objects brought to Belgium during the colonial period, six institutions launched the HOME project, whose goal is to provide peace, repatriation and burial to the remains of many colonized black bodies that were brought to Belgium in the colonial period, as trophies of conquest, as objects of study, as beings to be exhibited, as bodies of work.(7)

Perhaps now a new phase of decolonisation is beginning, in which Belgium begins to look at its colonial ghosts and begins a process of decolonisation of its former colony. Perhaps one day the dream enunciated by Patrice Lumumba in the last letter to his wife Pauline will be fulfilled and it will be possible for Belgian children and Congolese children, European children and African children to learn part of the common history of their countries, respecting different memories and refusing the logic of oblivion.

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(1) Tshonda, Jean Omasombo (2020) *La Décolonisation du Congo belge. La gestion politique des 24 derniers mois avant l'indépendance,* Tervuren: AfricaMuseum.

(2) All quotations are from Patrice Émery Lumumba (2018) *Chora, Ó Negro, Irmão Bem-Amado*, Falas Afrikanas. (transl. Apolo de Carvalho, José Santy Jr and Zetho Cunha Gonçalves), pp. 18, 24.

(3) Cabral, Amílcar "Morreu Lumumba, para que a África viva, 1961", in *Chora, Ó Negro, Irmão Bem-Amado*, pp. 27-38.

(4) Michael Taussig, (1999), *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, Stanford University Press. p. 6.

(5) Lombé, Lizette (2018) *Black Words*, Paris, L'Arbre à paroles.

(6) "https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-53232803au Congo", 30 July 2020.

(7) *HOME - Human Remains Origin(s) Multidisciplinary Evaluation* is a federal scientific project launched in 2019, with four coordinators and involving six institutions. More information here.

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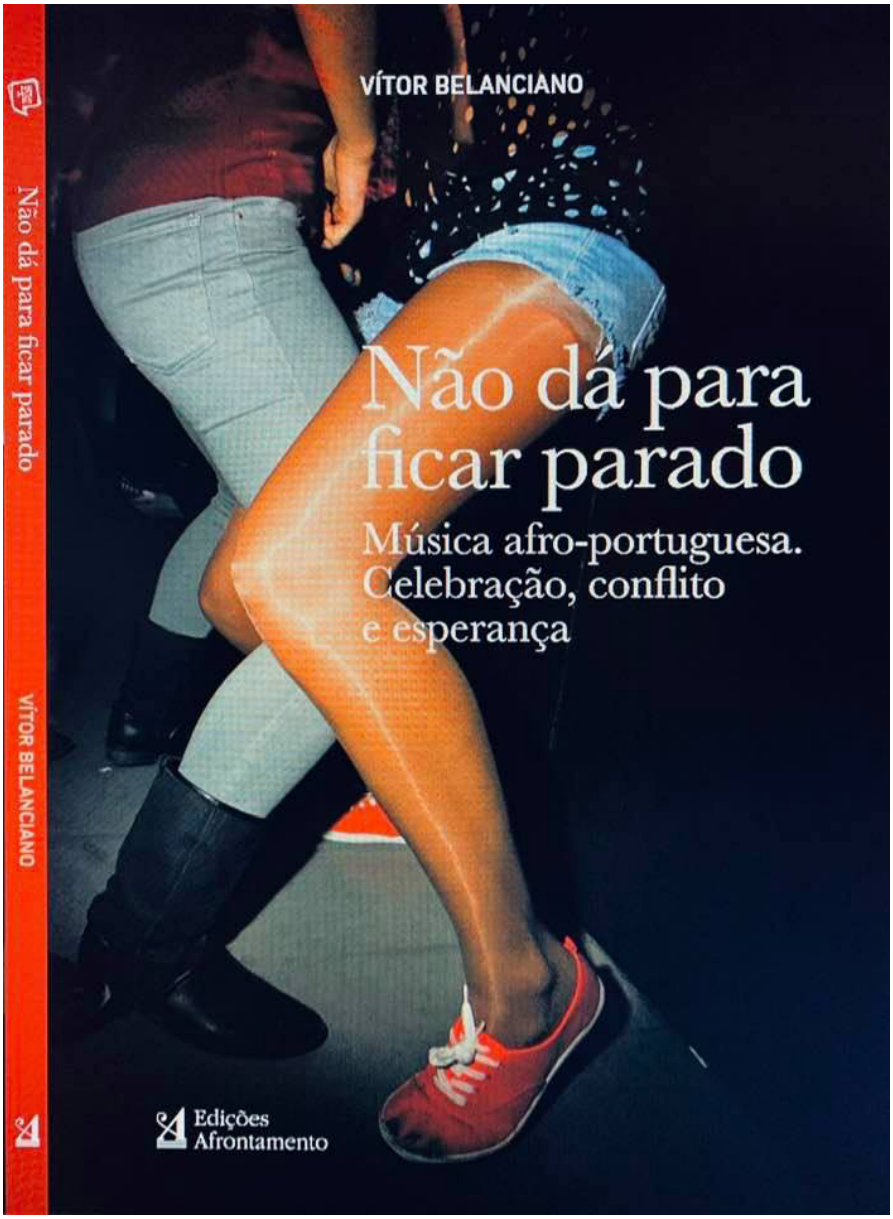

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THE HISTORY AND THE PROTAGONISTS OF AFRO-PORTUGUESE MUSIC

Inês Nascimento Rodrigues

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Não dá para ficar parado. Música afro-portuguesa. Celebração, conflito e esperança [*To stand still is not an option. Afro-Portuguese Music. Celebration, Conflict and Hope*], by Vítor Belanciano, is the fifth and most recent book in the series 'Memoirs – Filhos do Império' [Memoirs – Children of Empire] published by Edições Afrontamento. It tells the story of a wide array of artists, from General D, Chullage and Djamal, to Buraka Som Sistema, Sara Tavares, Allen Halloween, Mindy Guevara, Throes + The Shine, Batida or Scúru Fitchádu, Dino d' Santiago and the DJs of Príncipe Discos. The journalist and critic from the newspaper *Público* lays out a different cartography of contemporary Portuguese music, putting 'Afro-' centre stage.

From the point of view of Belanciano, 'Afro-Portuguese music' is music produced mainly by black Portuguese people and African immigrants in Portugal. It weaves together sounds like funaná, semba, zouk, gumbé and batuku – to name just a few examples – with more widely globalized musical languages such as rap and electronica, among others. Under this perspective, Afro-Portuguese music is the product of transcultural, transgenerational and transnational journeys, reelaborations and partnerships, giving shape to a different history of Portuguese culture and society. Rather than being just recognized as part of a reality set apart, Black contributions, voices and legacies are given value as vital elements in the Portuguese artistic universe.

The relevance of black participation in Portugal in diverse fields – including music – dates back hundreds of years, but is rarely articulated in dominant public narratives. It is not, of course, that black people in Portugal do not have a voice, or are not present in the everyday life of the country. Rather, at least beyond a tendentially circumscribed cultural sphere, it is a question of speaking without being listened to, of seeing without being seen, of singing without being heard.

However, in the last decade or so, there has been a noticeable emergence of renewed spaces for debate and critique over the place of racialized bodies and silenced voices in Portugal. This political, social and artistic movement is the fruit of a wide trajectory which the *Memoirs* project has been following closely. It has found expression in literature, visual, plastic and performative arts, in cinema, academia, activism and in the media. It is indissociable from broader discussions about art, (anti)racism, the politics of visibility, citizenship, and hierarchies of power. These are the questions that – speaking symbolically, and in particular relation to music – are enunciated by the children of Buraka Som Sistema and the grandchildren of General D. For these musicians, their position as artists and their songs are powerful tools of denunciation, mobilization and political intervention. They can produce counter-memories and

provide cultural affirmation. As dozens of interviews by Vítor Belanciano over more than a decade attest, those are the foundations these musicians build upon to claim public recognition of their place in Portuguese culture and society.

Much of the music, sounds and discourse of the artists convened by Vítor Belanciano in this book express an ambiguous heritage, operating between celebration, silencing and conflict. They relate (sometimes more, sometimes less) actively and explicitly to questions of race and class, racism and inequality, and oppression and violence – not just police violence – against black people in Portugal (see, also, among others, Varela, 2020 and Andrade, 2019). In some cases, they may also assert themselves as a response to the negative representations so often pushed on black men and women in a certain Portugal that is still averse to confronting its colonial-racist past and its legacies in the present.

It is undeniable that today the national soundscape, and that of Lisbon in particular, is also drawn from its suburbs, notably the neighbourhoods of Quinta do Mocho, Jamaica, Cova da Moura, Reboleira and Seixal. These are places that no longer constitute themselves merely as sites of stigmatization, but as sites of creativity and revitalization for Portuguese music; places that are not afraid of making the "centre" move, to use Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's much cited expression (1993). This is precisely what Vítor Belanciano's *Não dá para ficar parado* suggests, from the title onwards, pointing at the political, social and cultural gesture of dislocation that Afro-Portuguese music may represent as an exercise in the decolonization of the arts, culture and history in Portugal.

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