



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Parenthèse | 2018 | Katia Kameli (courtesy of the artist)

WORKS OF ART AND THE CONDITION OF POST-MEMORY (1)

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After the independence in Africa and Asia – and in some cases, before – hundreds of thousands of people from formerly colonized nations moved to Europe. This migration included groups associated with the colonial structure, *pieds-noirs*, *retornados*, ex-military personnel of the former colonies, collaborators with the colonial administration, exiles, and those who over the decades had sold their labour to the former colonial countries. Generally men, sometimes accompanied by their wives, this wave of migration led to families that now stretch over three generations.



The first generation of descendants arrived as children, with some experience and memory of their places of origin. The second and third generations were born, grew up and were educated in the European countries in which their parents and grandparents had arrived. These various groups, although with different life stories and different memories, now constitute a large part of the European population, and, in a few decades, have changed European demography and cultural geography. This period saw the constitution of a particular European multiculturalism and is indissolubly associated with post-colonialism. We can trace its beginning to independence, but its end is yet to come, even though some institutions in Europe want to declare it over. However, it is enough to follow European artistic production over recent decades to see that there has been an emergence of a set of actors who bring with them new and heterogeneous artistic productions, languages and forms. The first empirical responses to this emergence, in innovative artistic circuits, have been of surprise and pleasure. Common to all of them is a syncretism that combines cultural traces of, and references to, non-European places with more recognizable and stable European forms.

This group, specially the second generation, identify themselves as subjects of post-memory. The research project *Memoirs – Children of Empire and European Post-memories* focuses on citizens with origins in former Portuguese, French and Belgian colonies, however, this framework is common to diasporas of other origins. It draws on Marianne Hirsch's thesis that states, in simple terms, "post-memory exists when some memories have been transmitted in such a profound way that they seem to constitute memories in themselves" (1). To this, António Sousa Ribeiro adds that: "the constitution of post-memory is a complex process that can assume very diverse forms and that [...] is never based in a simple process of transmission, but rather implies an active positioning, a decision, on the part of the members of the second generation. This decision is never played out on a strictly rational level. It presupposes, inevitably, a high degree of emotional involvement" (2).

This may be true, but in light of theoretical work on transfer, sublimation, repression and denial, as much as it is a memorialization of what is transferred by the parents, this emotional experience also results in a deferral of lived experience. Transfer to the second generation happens in various ways. Though some minimal patterns can be identified, we cannot claim them as universal categories of thought. The experience of recognition among the general public takes on particular and complex characteristics among artists. Here, we should differentiate between those who use the body as their primary mode of artistic expression – the voice of the singer, the body of the performer – which can be approached more through a theory of emotion or artistic expression mediated by objects or instruments, and those who work in the visual arts, in which the emotions provoked by re-memory are different.



It is worth dwelling on the contribution of Beatriz Sarlo (3). She argues that “the whole experience of the past is vicarious, but the substitution of experience is not exclusive to post-memory” (4). We could add that, in the specific case of second generation artists from the African diaspora, their *rememorial* narratives include other kinds of information from school, media, or groups of friends (5). There is no relation of cause and effect between life in formerly colonized territories and the experience of the immigrant. Nonetheless, there are certain traces, voices, sounds, remnants, recurrent gestures, culinary habits, visual documents and objects of memory that create the conditions for the emergence of an artistic condition of post-memory. To draw this out we can consider the research that artists do to make their work. Both in the second generation, and perhaps even more intensely in the third generation, this work includes archival research, interviews, travel and fieldwork in the territories of their families’ origin. It brings artistic production closer to historical research. This often results in art and narrative that, on the one hand, reconciles part of the inherited patrimony of post-memory with the history told by artistic objects, but, on the other hand, contradicts the official, institutional narratives of the former colonial countries where the artistic diaspora lives and creates.

This dual process can be referred to as the decolonization of the arts (6). It is an ongoing practice which conditions the way that artists belong to the current of post-memory. We can also articulate other qualities that these works share: cultural traditions drawn from ex-colonies (rhythms, tapestry, painting, couscous sculpture, griot singing or Rai), traces of alternative modernisms (Malian and Mozambican photography, Moroccan modernist painting), the systematic deconstruction of iconography and public statuary in European countries and ex-colonies, the revision and deconstruction of the universal history of art, the critique of Afro-pessimism, the struggle against racism, the questioning of identities, the possibility/impossibility of return, the urgency of reparations, and the clear enunciation that while the context of artistic production is the relationship between Europe and Africa, the theme is not Africa. In listing these attributes of diasporic artistic production, we must recognize that they are not exclusive to artists with heritage in formerly colonized countries. They often feature in work by artists with no biographical experience that we could classify through the post-memory of the colonial. There are artists whose memories are an inheritance of a white European patrimony but who, through their education in school or through friendship circles, have come into contact with alternative post-colonial narratives, and been alerted to other realities. We can also identify a tendency towards artistic research and the investigation of historical narratives. In this field of artistic production, emotional empathy has been fundamental, as have the politics of colonial deconstruction and the mechanisms of migration.



They share, too, a search for artistic forms that can lead to outputs that express the qualities outlined above. We should, therefore, consider a conceptual redefinition that dislocates itself from the artist (7) to the work of art. Consequently, we arrive at the task of conceptualizing not the artist of post-memory, but works of art under the condition of post-memory.

(1) Hirsch, Marianne (2008), "The Generation of Postmemory", *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103.

(2) António Sousa Ribeiro, "Pós-memória e ressentimento", [Newsletter Memoirs](#), 23.11.2019.

(3) Sarlo, Beatriz, *Tempo Passado, tempo da memória e guinada subjetiva*, trad. Rosa Freira d'Aguiar, UFMJ, 2005.

(4) Cf. Sarlo, Beatriz, *Tempo Passado, tempo da memória e guinada subjetiva*, trad. Rosa Freira d'Aguiar, UFMJ, 2005, p.93-94.

(5) In the interviews with artists done as fieldwork for the *MEMOIRS* project it was often emphasized by interviewees that groups of friends and their experience at school outside the family environment were key to their professional choices, and to the material they worked with.

(6) In relation to this, see *Décolonisons les arts!*, directed by Françoise Vergès, Gerty Dambury, Paris, l'Arche, 2015.

(7) In other context it would appropriate to approach this centring of the figure of the artist and not the work that is a constant in histories of modern and contemporary art, and that is the results from legitimising art on the basis of its producer, the artist. See Baudelaire, Charles, *O pintor da vida moderna (1863-1868)*, translated Teresa Cruz, Veja, 2013.

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