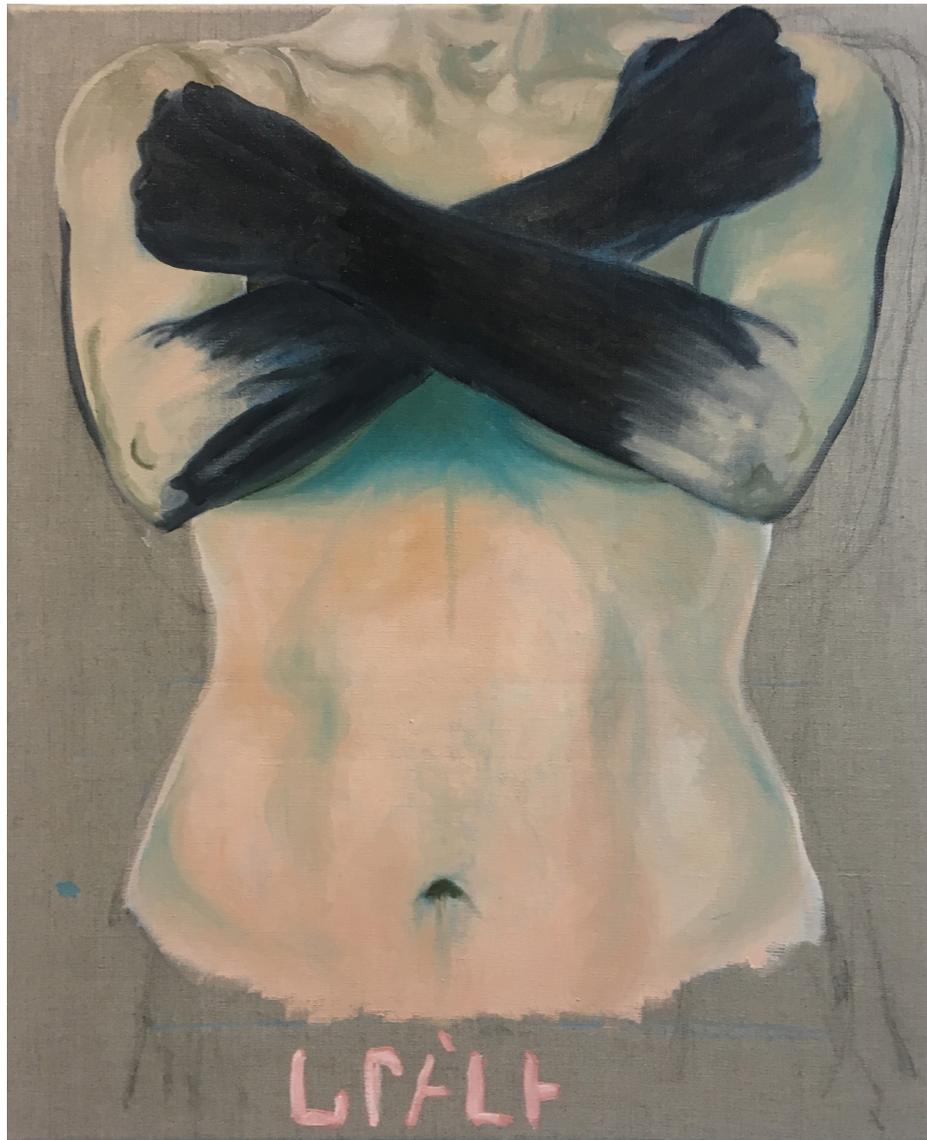




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 8 June 2019



Sorceress | May 8th to July 27th | Group exhibition | Julien Salaud, Katia Bourdarel, Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, Marion Laval-Jeantet, Myriam Mechita, Annette Messenger, Lionel Sabatté... Curator Marie Deparis-Yafil, H2M, Bourg-en-Bresse (courtesy of the artists)

SILENCES WHICH BECOME ART

Fernanda Vilar



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On the 23rd February 2005 the French parliament passed a law stating “the recognition by the Nation of repatriated French people” (1) and declaring France’s desire to revisit its colonial past, in particular by including it in school and university curricula. Fourteen years have passed since the passing of that law. Since then majority of the debate that has taken place has been within a revisionist atmosphere, but it is only recently that studies have emerged (2) that question the official narrative.

Also in 2005, in November, the so-called “crisis of the *banlieues*” took place. Its repercussions in the media were significant: it was prominently covered in many countries, and showed that the citizens of former colonies were a large part of the population of the *banlieues* of large French cities. Made up mainly of two or three generations of immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the *banlieues* need to be discussed in a less responsive, more informed way, that avoids the recapitulation of racist stereotypes. However, official discourse fails to address the diversity of French history, or explain immigration as a result of colonialism. We should turn, therefore, to the flourishing artistic production of French second and third generation immigrants. This artistic practice provides the essential personal stories and archival details which are needed to resuscitate and inform debate.

1962 marked the end of colonialism in Algeria. Yet even today Algerians and their descendants want to hear their stories told afresh. They want to fill in the gaps, overcome the silence and correct the dissonances that permeate the negative stories told in private and the official discourse of the French state, above all in relation to the events of the war of independence. They include the children and grandchildren of the *harkis* (3), considered to be traitors in Algeria for having fought on the side of the French, the *pieds-noirs* (the equivalent of Portuguese *retornados*, the settler colonial community who returned after independence) and French-Algerians, whose parents migrated to France before and after independence. They include, finally, the veterans of the war of independence themselves.

The choreographer Nacera Belaza remembers a childhood in Algeria, up to the age of five, full of great freedom, nature, luminous days, terracotta earth and an endless blue sky. She remembers, too, heavy, dark nights of uncertain space and extent, full of distant and intense sounds. In her journey as a choreographer she has always played with light and dark. In her most recent creation, [Le cercle](#) (2018), the watcher’s eyes have to adjust to the darkness of the room to see barely illuminated dancers, who seem to be mirages. Sound comes from far away, as if we were in a village in the mountains. Little spots of light emerge when something passes, but we can’t be sure what it is. It is as if Nacera Belaza



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offers us a vision of the childhood she narrated in her interview with the MEMOIRS group. It is the only piece of choreography in which she does not dance, as if she wants to bring one cycle to a close, and see what can be made out of personal memories and a desire to explore family history and her country of origin. According to the choreographer, her parents are part of the “generation of silence” which sought to save their children from the humiliations they themselves suffered as immigrants. Within the family, the fear of losing one’s origins has created an imaginary Algeria that is fixed in time. France seems to be only a place to pass through: “we do not belong to this place”, her father says. Inserted into this dichotomy, the artist takes to living and creating according to the motto “*Liberté dans la contrainte*” (Freedom within limits). These limits go from the physical – living in a house that is too small for a family – to the psychological – reconciling the dreams of parents who wanted to stay in Algeria, with the reality of those brought up in France. Today she forges a dynamic relation between France and Algeria, building a bridge to show that the two countries share a recent history that must be explored.

Silence was also a constant feature in the childhood of the journalist and documentary-maker Dorothee Myriam Kellou, for whom Algeria was a taboo subject for a long time. Her Algerian father lived in France as if in exile, while her French mother did not allow the past to be openly discussed. After their divorce, her father began to talk about his history. Inadvertently coming across a concrete trace of the past in the form of the statue of Sergeant Blandan (which was in his village in Algeria and that is found today in the city of Nancy, where he lives), this monument crystallizes her father’s fears as he admits to feeling oppressed by his memories. Dorothee Kellou makes a documentary about this paternal trauma, “A Manshourah tu nous as séparés” (2019). This allows her to lift the weight of silence from what her father could not speak about: his life in a displaced persons camp. This is a history that few people know, on either side of the Mediterranean. Addressing the symbolic value of her work, and its place in her personal life, the film-maker says, “I feel divided between my present and my origins, but I believe that the film is part of [a] process” (4): connecting episodes of French and Algerian history, the film overrides her mother’s prohibition on going to Algeria to discover her father’s history.

Traces of the colonial past both inhabit everyday reality and feed the stories of fiction. In her book *L’art de perdre* (2017), Alice Zeniter confronts the main character (and her *alter ego*), Naïma, with the traces of a past that is not past. She is the granddaughter of *harkis* who came to France in 1962. The character works in an art gallery and her manager tasks her with organizing a retrospective of an Algerian artist,



Lalla, who lives in France. Visiting the artist's apartment, the protagonist's first impression is its sober atmosphere. It "gives the impression that it was laid out for someone who would not live there" (p.339). However, looking more closely, the narrator "cannot stop herself from comparing the house with her grandmother's apartment, in which Algeria fills every corner, loudly and ostentatiously" (p.340). She notes the Muslim calendars, the copper trays decorated with Arabic script, the photograph of Mecca, the tea cups, the television switched to an Algerian channel. Algeria is there in the silver jewellery and in the ochre colour of the women's hair. Naima concludes, however, that "behind it all there is nothing (...)". The narrator writes that "Naima's family has been going around with Algeria for so long that they no longer know what surrounds them. Memories? Dreams? A lie?" (p.340). The duality between being obliged to abandon roots and the impossibility of actually erasing them permeates the novel. Zeniter shows the difficulty in facing history that those who inherit it face. They are at once confronted with a colonial past that insists on returning them to their origins, while at the same time there is no enlightened, un-prejudiced debate which would enable them to understand their place in French society today.

To affirm her *kabyle* heritage and avoid reproducing an idealized Algeria, the film-maker Fatima Sissani has made various documentaries which investigate (her) life as an immigrant. She arrived in France as a six-year old, and had to deal with her own duality: a mother who never spoke French, but only *kabyle*. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon, "to accept a language is to accept a civilization", as well as the exterior world of a society that speaks French. This conflict of silences, civilizations and languages was portrayed in her first documentary, *La langue de Zahra* (5) (2011). On telling the story of her mother, Fatima retraces the journey of women who found themselves forced to find refuge in their apartments in the sombre *banlieues* of Paris, far from the light and freedom of the Kabylie mountains. The retraction and the silence of her mother in France transforms in front of the camera in Algeria. There Fatima can finally see the essence and soul of a woman who, painfully, left her native Algeria but insisted on passing her culture on to her children. From within her mother's exile, Sissani turns cultural heritage into resistance and memory.

In these artists' personal perspectives on French history, elements appear which enable new official narratives in which the immigrant is not seen as a threat, but as part of the diversity of a nation. By including the histories of those who helped to reconstruct Europe, the idea of Europe is itself strengthened. In their diverse forms, these women's art allows us to analyse the contemporary



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moment and to construct an idea of the future. As the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi has said, “art is the force that makes reality say what it cannot say on its own, or, in any case, what it would risk leaving lying in silence” (6).

(1) [“Portant reconnaissance de la Nation en faveur des Français rapatriés”](#). All translations my own.

(2) For instance those of Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire and Benjamin Stora.

(3) The *Le Robert* dictionary suggests that the term *harki* comes from the Arabic “*harka*”, for “military operation”. This name was given by French soldiers to supplementary troops of the French army, simply as a descriptive term. Afterwards *harki* came to refer, by extension, to all the Algerians who had to leave their country – many to remain as French citizens – because of their actions against the cause of independence during the war. However, in Algeria the meaning of the words evolved, and to call someone *harki* is to call them a traitor. For more on the stigmas of the word, see [this article](#).

(4) “Je me sens tiraillée entre mon présent et mes origines, mais je pense que le film est une partie de ce processus”. Interview with MEMOIRS 26th March 2019.

(5) The film will be shown on 3rd October 2019 in the Culturgest in Lisbon, with the director in attendance. A clip can be seen [here](#).

(6) Free translation of “L’art c’est la force de faire dire à la réalité ce qu’elle n’aurait pu dire par ses propres moyens ou, en tout cas, ce qu’elle risquait de passer volontairement sous silence”. Sony Labou Tansi, preface of *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985).

Translated by Archie Davies

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