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The artist as historian, strategies against the erasure of memory

L'artiste en historien, stratégies contre les effacements de la mémoire

Abstract

If history is what was collectively decided to be remembered, artists often emphasize what was collectively decided to be forgotten. Susan Sontag summed up the attitude of many contemporary artists who propose an alternative to the narrative of the dominant history, which was often written by the victors, by freely using the tools of the "historian". The artist Kader Attia highlights both the wound and the healing process while Jean-François Boclé dictates the Black Code in a performance piece. Without becoming true historians, artists symbolically attempt to heal "postcolonial melancholy" and propose different strategies against forgetfulness or denial of memory. These questions are currently back on the table in the light of discussions concerning the restitution of objects to Africa by Western museums.

Key words

History, memory, trauma, reparation, restitution of African heritage.

Résumé

Si l'histoire est ce dont il a été décidé collectivement de se souvenir, les artistes viennent souvent mettre l'accent sur ce dont il a été décidé collectivement d'oublier. Avec cette formule, Susanne Sontag résume une attitude de plusieurs artistes contemporains qui, en usant de façon libre des outils de l'"historien", viennent proposer une alternative au récit de l'histoire dominante, écrite souvent par les vainqueurs. L'artiste Kader Attia met en lumière aussi bien la blessure que sa réparation alors que Jean-François Boclé performe la dictée du Code noir. Sans devenir de véritables historiens, les artistes prennent symboliquement soin de la "mélancolie postcoloniale" et proposent des stratégies différentes contre l'oubli ou le déni de mémoire. Ces questions se reposent actuellement sous un jour nouveau à la lumière des discussions quant à la restitution des objets en Afrique par les musées occidentaux.

Mots clés

Histoire, mémoire, trauma, réparation, restitution du patrimoine africain

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1- Quoted by Dieter Roelstraete in "L'art après l'histoire", the exhibition catalogue for Une histoire, art, architecture, design, des années 1980 à nos jours, Christine Macel (dir), Paris, Centre Pompidou/Flammarion, 2014, p. 25.

2- On the subject of the contemporary artist as historian and their propensity to work with archives, see Hal Foster's writings in "An archival impulse", October, vol 110, Autumn 2004, p. 3-22, Mark Godfry, "The artist as historian", October, Spring 2007, vol. 120, p. 140-172, Suely Rolnik, Archive Mania, Documenta 13 Notebook 022, July 2011.

3- At the launch of his book *Politiques de l'inimitié*, historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe advised masters students in African studies in the Sorbonne (for the most part from Africa) to not only write the history of Africa but also the history of the West from the point of view of the peoples of Africa.

4- See *Can the Subaltern Speak?* The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Routledge; 1st edition (December 12, 1995).

5- We should point out that in a number of history manuals and writings in the West, Christopher Columbus is said to have "discovered" America as if the continent didn't exist before he arrived.

6- See Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (1981) and Michael Löwy's, « Le point de vue des vaincus dans l'histoire de l'Amérique latine: réflexions méthodologiques à partir de Walter Benjamin », « Walter Benjamin la tradition des vaincus », *Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale*, n° 4, Paris, L'Herne, p. 63-71.

7- See, for example, the controversy around the recent reopening of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium which was renamed the Africa Museum.

If history is what has been collectively decided should be remembered,¹ artists often put the emphasis on what has been decided should be forgotten. Wearing the garb of the "historian"², they propose an alternative to the dominant narrative, which is often written, as we know, by the winners.³

Today, when post/de/colonial studies are gaining ground in critical thought, but the voice of the "subalterns", to use Spivak's⁴ term, is still being drowned out, a number of African thinkers and artists from the larger space that is termed the Black Atlantic, and also from ex-colonies like India, are going back to the beginning and questioning the historical narrative¹ on slavery and colonisation. In 1992, during the debates around the fifth centenary of Christopher Columbus' arrival on American shores,⁵ the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, called for a celebration, not for the winners, but for those who were defeated: indigenous peoples, black and mixed-race slaves⁶

Museums that house collections linked to this history have attempted to rework the narrative by changing their museography, with mixed results,⁷ often involving memorial strategies that deal with the events, statistics and traces of the past. But as Edouard Glissant wrote, on the subject of museums paying homage to the victims of slavery, "the backdrops and installations avoid any type of realistic reconstruction, that can convey very little as they will never reach the level of cruelty of the holds of slave ships and the caves on Plantations".⁸ Achille Mbembe thinks it is impossible to bring a slave into a museum today without emptying them of their strength and their primal energy.⁹

Nevertheless, is it possible to "decolonise museums" and attempt to redress the denial and erasure of memory? How can we rewrite history with a more critical viewpoint without, for example, being able to change the words of King Leopold II and Albert I that glorify colonialism on the walls of the Africa Museum in Tervuren in Belgium?

Antonio Pinto tells us that it is absolutely possible: "Yes, it can be decolonised, it should be and it is possible". But on condition, he says, citing the collection of essays by Latin-American scholars, *Coloniality at Large* that "we de-epistemologise Western colonialism as presented in museums and deconstruct it through epistemic disobedience that still has to be worked out".¹⁰ Unless, he concludes, referring to the work of anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, we take the Native American stance and push things as far as "the radicality of not needing a museum". "In this Native American perspective of infinite subjectivities, where notions of space and time are associated with those of continuity, reversibility and simultaneousness, the creation of a museum is not only superfluous, it is impossible. In each person, as in each animal, there simultaneously exists a cosmogony and a finitude, a heritage and a future. There is no idea of historical progress that would make the creation of a museum necessary..."¹¹ Achille Mbembe, for whom the museum is also "a space where strengths are neutralised and domesticated, strengths that, before their museification, were living – fluxes of power",¹² calls for the foundation of a new institution, "the antimuseum", that he defines as "the figure of another type of place, a place of radical hospitality".¹³

The restitution of African heritage

The narrative of the history of colonial slavery put forward by Western museums is currently linked to the question of the official restitution of African heritage to Africa. After independence, a number of African countries called for the return of objects to Africa, and in particular, objects that had been stolen or “acquired in the wrong circumstances”.¹⁴ In November 2017 in Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso, the French President Emmanuel Macron, solemnly promised the “temporary or definitive restitution of heritage objects to Africa” over the next five years.¹⁵ One year after President Macron’s promise, in November 2018, writer and economist Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy handed in a report on the question of the restitution of African cultural heritage. The recommendation was to come up with a new relational ethic.

On the front of their report, they quoted Michel Leiris, the French writer who was part of the French ethnographic mission to Africa, known as Dakar/ Djibouti (1931-1933). The writer was the Secretary on the mission, and he evoked the systematic pillage of objects in Africa. “...We pilfer from the Africans under the pretext of teaching others how to love them and get to know their culture, that is, when all is said and done, to train even more ethnographers, so they can head off to encounter them and ‘love and pilfer’ from them as well.” The quotation was intended to remind the reader that the objects in Western museums were, for the most part, pillaged. However, all of the objects that come from former colonies or lands far away were not pillaged or stolen. Some were obviously acquired in murky circumstances, some were exchanged for services rendered, “bought” by force or obtained at a ridiculously low price. For example, in the 1930s, they paid 7 francs (the cost of a dozen eggs at the time), for a mask, that was worth 200 francs on the French market. Objects that were bought, in particular during the ethnographic missions of the thirties, and the sums paid, are often well known. However, most ethnographic museums do not mention the provenance of the objects on the signs and as such, erase part of their history. This is not the case for recent acquisitions, where the history of the object can be questioned: “To be more explicit, it is a question of an object’s legality, but also of its legitimacy, its honourability to circulate, to be exchanged. The delicate question of restitutions must be examined in the light of this requirement”.¹⁶

The question of restitution obviously does not concern the objects that were legally acquired after independence to enrich museum collections. The Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac museum in Paris celebrated 20 years of acquisitions this year with an exhibition and an extensive catalogue.¹⁷ In his introductory text, to “Vingt ans après”, the museum’s director, Stéphane Martin,¹⁸ reminds the reader that the museum is the “depository of the collections of the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. It is not our intention here to retrace the institutional history of the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac: let us just remember, he says, that these collections are the product of

8- Edouard Glissant, *Mémoires des esclavages. La fondation d’un centre national pour la mémoire des esclavages et de leurs abolitions*, Paris, NRF/La documentation française, 2007, p. 153-154.

9- Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, Paris, La Découverte 2016, p. 157: “In order to gain rights in the museum as it exists today, the slave would have to have all of his strength and primary energy sapped away, like all of the primitive objects that have preceded them.”

10- Antonio Pinto Ribeiro, *Peut-on décoloniser les musées?* Conférence, Paris, éd. de la Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, coll. *Tout se transforme*, 2019, p. 34-35.

11- Antonio Pinto Ribeiro, *Peut-on décoloniser les musées ?* op. cit., p. 39.

12- Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, op. cit., p. 157.

13- *Ibid.*, p. 158.

14- The official argument that had always been put forward for non-restitution was that these objects were now part of the “inalienable” public collections – and that it was legally impossible to do so.

15- This was a strong symbolic gesture that allows us to reconsider history, and the oversights and denials of memory, even if this gesture might be seen to go beyond the question of “justice” and “reparation” of the wrong that was done to African people. It could be also seen in the context of China’s current policy and its increasing presence on the African continent. As an example, it is interesting to note that the new Musée des civilisations noires in Dakar was financed and gifted to the Senegalese state by China.



17- Stéphane Martin, « Vingt ans après », in 20 ans. Les acquisitions du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, exhibition catalogue (December 24 2019-January 26 2020), Yves Le Fur dir., Paris, éd. Skira/Musée du quai Branly, 2019, p. 11.

18- 20 ans. Les acquisitions du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, exhibition catalogue (December 24 2019-January 26 2020), Yves Le Fur dir., Paris, éd. Skira/Musée du quai Branly, 2019.

19- The director of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum (1998-2019) said, in an interview with Philippe Dagen and Guillaume Fraissard: "What I really want is for the museum to gain colour, we are much too white. It is still very complicated to get curators from native countries. That is our next step", "I want the Quai Branly to gain more colour", *Le Monde*, January 3 2020, p. 15.

20- Stéphane Martin, « Vingt ans après », in 20 ans. Les acquisitions du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, op. cit., p. 10.

21- Yves Le Fur, « Une collection en mouvement », 20 ans. Les acquisitions du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, op.cit., p. 29.

22- Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, 2018, p. 39.

23- Stéphane Martin, "I want the Quai Branly to gain more colour", interview quoted above.

24- Alexis de Toqueville, *De la colonie en Algérie* (1841), Bruxelles, Complexe, 1988, quoted by Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015, p. 162.

25- Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, op.cit., p. 41.

many centuries of exploration and trade, of scientific digs but also institutional exchanges".¹⁹ It is clear that all of the objects in the museum's collections are not the result of pillage but the result of the museum's longstanding acquisition process. However, they could have examined the history of the collections before their transfer to the museum. Yves Le Fur asked, "What should have been done about the historic collections? (...) Were we going to consider their historic dimensions and enrich it or ostracise objects from the dark period that could never be purified by repentance or good conscience?"²⁰ History often haunts the process of enriching a museum's collections from historical collections. This was the perfect opportunity to evoke the forgetting and erasure of memory linked to the historical provenance of the collections so as to avoid giving the impression of wiping the slate clean by only mentioning the inaugural 'pure' moment, where the acquisitions for the new museum began.

The restitution of African heritage linked to this history should be envisaged, according to the Savoy-Sarr report, as an attempt at a new relational ethic: "Objects, having become diasporas, are the mediators in a relation that needs to be reinvented. Their return to their communities of origin does not have as its aim to substitute one form of physical and semantic imprisonment for another (...) It is indeed a question of reactivating a concealed memory, and resituating to the heritage its signifying, integrative, dynamic and mediatory functions within contemporary African societies."²¹ Stéphane Martin explains why he disagreed with the conclusions of the Savoy-Sarr report: "I prefer the term sharing to that of restitution. The question of ownership must not be overlooked, but what is most important is that the collections must be accessible and shared. Transfers of ownership are suitable to a certain extent but not to the extent that is recommended in the Savoy-Sarr report, which calls for self-flagellation and repentance."²²

However, the history of these objects only makes sense alongside the archives that a number of ex colonies, first and foremost Algeria, have been requesting for a long time. Or at the very least, what's left of the archives as we know that all documents from before the French colonised Algeria were systematically destroyed. Alexis de Tocqueville said "In order to make the vestiges of enemy domination disappear completely, we took care to shred or burn all written documents, administrative registers and authentic papers that may have perpetuated the trace of what was done before we arrived".²³ Today, these archives, "have become a veritable topos of missing links, relayed by the press, certain contemporary artists, and political personnel in Africa as well as historians on both continents",²⁴ can be considered "missing links" essential to filling in the gaps.

Gaps

Current events give the meaning behind Moridja Kitenge's "The National Museum of Africa" a new resonance. It was conceived by the artist well before the official decision to return African objects and art works to Africa, and the

installation is adapted according to where it is being exhibited. The visitor enters a Western-style museum exhibition space, that of the "TNMOA", complete with logo, reserves and inventory numbers. The visitor finds themselves in front of empty stands and well-lit, but empty spaces on walls. The installation expresses the absence of objects in the African national museum, emptied of its treasures. The cards that describe the absent pieces explain that they are "on loan" to various museums in the West, in cities like Paris, London, New York and Geneva. The catalogue of the museum's collections that accompanies the exhibition also plays with the idea of absence. Most of the pages are empty except for a few descriptions of missing objects. "Amnesia has done its job, and the memory erasure has worked so well that some communities are unaware that these heritage objects exist and the extent of the loss."²⁵

26- Remarks by the artist on the piece.



Image 1: Mordja Kitenge The National Museum of Africa [TNMOA] 2009-2020 (wood, plexiglas, digital print on paper, sound), variable dimensions Installation view from the exhibition Expression(s) décoloniale(s), Musée d'histoire de Nantes, Nantes, France © Mordja Kitenge-Banza

The way western museums possess these objects mirrors the way in which the entire continent of Africa was considered to be a territory whose only fate was to be possessed.²⁶ Today, we are surprised, for example, to read, in a speech by Victor Hugo: "To render the old Africa amenable to civilisation, such is the problem. Europe will solve it. Come on people, take this land. Take it. From whom? From no one! God gave the Earth to men. God gives Africa to Europe. Take it (...). Pour your overflow into Africa, and solve your social problems at the same time. Change your proletariat into property-owners."²⁷

The authors of the report tell us that issue of returning objects to Africa varies according to the story that these objects can tell. "In countries where the loss of items of cultural heritage was linked to violent, painful, or tragic events (the end of the Abomey Kingdom, the sacking of Benin City, the battle of Adwa in Ethiopia, etc.) the memory is still very alive and the question still holds a fiery place within

27- Achille Mbembe, Critique de la raison nègre, Paris, La Découverte, 2015, p. 110.



28- Victor Hugo, « Discours sur l'Afrique », Actes et Paroles, t. 4, Laffont, coll. Bouquins, Paris, p. 1010, cité par Achille Mbembe, Critique de la raison nègre, op. cit., p. 110.

29- Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics, op.cit., p. 31.

the collective. For other communities, the question of restitution appears to be secondary, the translocation having taken place without making much noise nor in arousing much antagonism, through ethnographic missions or the release of objects into the art market. It is clear that the question of memory work, of memorialization and the work of history (the work of writing or re-writing of history) are just as important as restitutions strictly speaking.”²⁸

The issue of the restitution of objects that are themselves imbued with a painful history, highlights another story linked to the imposition of borders after the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) when Western countries carved up the African continent and drew borders that outlined their domination. The report tells us that “As a result of colonialism, certain objects produced by communities today find themselves straddling several borders. In these instances, objects of cultural heritage would serve the function of precisely abolishing the border sketched out by the conference of Berlin (1884-1885) through the mobilization of communities around material items symbolizing their unity and their fluid identity within geographies than transcend borders. For example, the Omarian family as descendants of the El Hadj Omar Tall, are spread throughout Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, and Guinea. Every year, they organize a gathering around the spiritual heritage of El Hadj Omar Tall, a portion of whose relics are currently housed in the National History Museum of the Havre, with other manuscripts being housed (517 items) in the Fond Archinard at the French National Library, and his sabre being housed at the Musée de l'Armée in Paris. Since 1994, this community has asked for the French authorities for the return of these relics along with the digitizing of the manuscripts. So far, all requests have been in vain.”²⁹ Who owns the famous sword that is currently on loan to Senegal from France (through the Army Museum), and to whom should it be returned? Felwine Sarr contends that the spiritual heart of the community is in Senegal, subtly and rapidly avoiding the prickly question of the borders that were imposed after colonisation.

Consequently, the return of these objects can be seen as a form of “reparation” that is both real and symbolic. One of the issues in colonial history that hasn't been thought through is the life of the objects; “Thus, it's less a question of reclaiming financial compensation than a symbolic reestablishment through a demand for truth.” Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy take Kader Attia's 2016 documentary “Reflecting Memory” as an example as it “shows that the recognition of this absent one allows for the restitution of something that, if it is not there, continues to demand to be put back in its proper place. It operates like the mirror that, by reflecting the missing limb of the amputee, allows him to mourn, and to palliate the pain, which is indeed real, caused by the phantom limb. The analogy can be made between individual pain and those pains of immaterial collectives, that have become obscured through a collective denial (the refusal of recognizing and working through painful memories as a result of colonialism for example). In these instances, the work of restitution and the production of meaning that accompanies it, repairs the absence of the objects of cultural heritage and their

effect on the collective psyche."³⁰ The writers advise that beyond the acceptance and recognition by the other, "An auto-soteriological process, taking the form of self-reparations, through a work on one's own history" (...) "should take place".³¹ This amounts to a sort of "self-decolonisation". This is indeed what authors like Achille Mbembe proposes also: the "de-colonisation of the collective unconscious and mentalities" should come from Africa itself.

Colonial trauma

Obviously, these reparations can only symbolically "repair" colonial trauma. As, in most cases, the "colonial legacy" to use Walter Mignolo's term, affects "the colonial imagination in the present which maintains unresolved contradictions in the past".³² Colonial domination in fact, imposed a form of epistemological domination in addition to political and military domination, that wielded a symbolic violence in all fields of knowledge. In colonised countries, the resistance movements were forced to take on the weapons of the dominant power in order to function. Artists work hard to defuse these weapons, these imposed viewpoints. Compared with the historian, the artist has the advantage of being able to choose bits, traces and archives from the past, individual stories, emotions and physical suffering, at their leisure. They reveal things that are often deeply buried, or cast a new light on them.

Trauma is often linked to what Paul Gilroy refers to as a "postcolonial melancholia".³³ The author obviously refers to the Black Atlantic as the "place" of colonial slavery, but this notion can be applied to other post-colonial spaces. Postcolonial melancholia is both a feeling and a state of mind. The body is the location for the trauma, as Franz Fanon so expertly determined regarding colonial trauma in Algeria, where he worked as a psychiatrist during the war of Independence. However, trauma goes hand in hand with unfinished mourning that transforms as much the societies that stem from slavery and colonisation in general, as the individuals themselves. Freud, in "Mourning and melancholia",³⁴ says that mourning can take a long time to end, but that time is needed to get over it. Perhaps, it is still too soon for the "original mourning" and the effects of what Ashis Nandy³⁵ refers to as a "mental war" to have been overcome. Buried, even erased memories and trauma that is forgotten too soon or relegated to the past, eventually lead to a diffuse feeling of "postcolonial melancholia".

The Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano put forward the idea that knowledge was also one of the instruments of colonisation.³⁶ "If we wish to uncover the political and economic structure of the imperialism/colonialism issue and reveal the perverse logic of the modernity/coloniality issue, we need to think of ways to decolonize the "mind" (Thiongo³⁷) and the "imagination" (Gruzinski³⁸) or, in other words, to decolonize knowledge and being."³⁹ Decolonisation should thus involve "every level of the colonial power matrix" (economic and political but also knowledge and being, gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge).⁴⁰

30-Ibid., p. 32.

31- Ibid., p. 40

32- Ibid., p. 41

33- Walter Mignolo; "Espacios geograficos y localizaciones epistemologicas : La ración entre la localización geográfica y la subalternización de conocimientos", in GEOgraphia - Año 7 - N° 12 - 2005, <http://periodicos.uff.br/geographia/article/view/13499/8699>, consulted December 16 2019, quoted by Juan Pablo Bermudez, postface in Walter Mignolo, *La desobediencia epistémica : rhétorique de la modernité, logique de la colonialité et grammaire de la décolonialité*, preface by Marc Maesschalck and postface by Juan Pablo Bermudez, Bruxelles, éd. P.I.E. Peter Lange, 2015, p. 165.

34- The term is used by Paul Gilroy in his essays *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, Verso. [Trad. franç. : *L'Atlantique noire*, Paris, Kargo, 2003.] (1993) and *Postcolonial melancholia*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

35- Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and melancholia", in *On the history of the psycho-analytic movement. Papers on Metapsychology and Other works*, The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Volume XIV (1914-1916).

36- *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, London/USA, Oxford University Press, 1983.

37- Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality", *Cultural Studies*, 21/2-3, 2007, p. 155-167.

38- N. W Thiongo, *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Heinemann, New York, 1986.

39- Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1988.

40- Walter Mignolo, *La desobediencia epistémica*, op. cit., p. 29

41-Ibid..., p. 31.

Colonial control came down to “mental representation and bodily feeling”. Artists who are capable of what Walter Mignolo terms “epistemic disobedience” come up with strategies to get around the ruses of coloniality. Art has the transgressive power needed to get beyond the self-imposed, internalised representations of domination that go beyond the colonial period. *Strange fruit*, by artist Barthélémy Toguo, for example, a huge installation in the Lelong Gallery in Paris, takes its title from the famous song⁴¹ sung by Billie Holliday in 1939 at the New York Café Society and speaks to the violent, racist lynching of so many African Americans.



Image 2: Barthélémy Toguo.
Strange Fruit, October 2017
Galerie Lelong & Co.
Paris © Barthélémy Toguo and
Galerie Lelong & Co.

Artists often work to fight not only against the erasure of memory, but also against the effects of buried memories. One of these strategies is to return mentally, and “remotely” to the scene of the crime, and to face up to the colonial memory and the trauma.

Reparations

In order to counter the denial of the memory of the wound, Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia proposes the notion of “reparation”. He tells us that the Western concept of reparation consists of going back to the original state and thus denying the wound. He uses a traditional practice from African, Asian and pre-modern Western societies, where “repairing means showing that one has treated the wound, giving the same importance to the healed scar as to the wound, [...] giving the wounded a second life”.⁴² The wound no longer exists but the reparation proves that it did exist at some stage.

42- Taken from a poem written and published in 1937 by Abel Meeropol against racism in the United States.

"Traditional reparation, according to Kader Attia, has always been a sign of time passing by making it obvious with texture, or colour, the subtlety of the marked detail that covers the wound all the better to reveal it (sometimes even by appropriating it or by "cannibalising", to use Oswald de Andrade's term, the remains of another culture) – as if one had to live with it, to accept it, not to be in denial. This is what our contemporary society needs to learn from these objects that represent a form of everyday metaphysics. Because they connect us to that part of ourselves that has never really disappeared..."⁴³

43- Remarks by Kader Attia on March 27 2017: <https://smak.be/fr/exposition/10994>

The process undertaken in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission⁴⁴ is an interesting example of acting against the denial of memory and supporting individuals in their grieving process. Even though the commission did lead to a certain amount of controversy, and did not deal fully with the issue of reparations, the effort involved allowed those who participated to "express" the violence they inflicted or experienced during apartheid.

44- Remarks by Kader Attia on March 27 2017, *ibid.*



Image 3: Panayiotis Michael. Remember Me (Street sign, variable dimensions) 2005 © Panayiotis Michael

Both sides must remember and recognise the trauma of the past, the colonised and the coloniser. Beyond any caricatural attempt to share blame and designate the guilty, the process of grieving and recovering from trauma must, as writer Alain Mabanckou in his book *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*,⁴⁵ involve a lucid battle against victimisation. This goes hand in hand with raising awareness about the mechanisms of domination that can be disguised as something else in order to keep working. The memory of the peoples that were enslaved and colonised must be shared and become the concern of all of humanity. Achille Mbembe points out that, it is time, to accept not only local and individual memory, but also what Edouard Glissant referred to as the memory of

45- The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).



46- Alain Mabankou, *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, Paris, Fayard, 2012.

47- "What I mean by Tout-monde is our world as it changes and lasts and, at the same time, the "vision" we have of it. The whole world in terms of its physical diversity and in the representations it inspires: that we could no longer sing, speak nor work in suffering from just our one spot, without dipping into the collective unconscious of that whole." Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. NRF, 1997, p. 160.

48- Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, op. cit., p. 104.

49- This slogan appeared after the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus where they took over 37% of the island. The slogan appeared on posters, badges and school children's copy books to let people know that the war and the occupation should not be forgotten.

50- The Code Noir or Edit du Roy outlined the regulations for the *Gouvernement & l'Administration de justice & la police des îles françaises de l'Amérique, & pour la discipline & le commerce des nègres & esclaves dans ledit pays*, signed in Versailles in March 1685. Article XLIV: "Let us declare that slaves are chattel, & that is how they enter the community".

There are two versions of the decree. The first was set down by Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1616-1683) and signed into law by Louis XIV in 1685. The second was signed into law by Louis XV in 1724. See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/essentiels/anthologie/code-noir> and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86086055>.

"Tout monde".⁴⁶ "Yet again today, it is not clear to everyone that the slavery of Black Africans and colonial atrocities are part of the world's memory; neither is it clear that this memory, as it is shared, is not just the property of the people who were victims of these events, but of humanity as a whole."⁴⁷

Some artists have adopted other strategies in the fight against forgetting and the erasure of memory. The Cypriot artist Panyiotis Michael inverts the slogan "Never forget"⁴⁸ and changes it to "Remember me", transforming the negative concept of never forgetting into the positive one of remembering.

Artist Kader Attia transforms the idea of "fighting erasure" to "supporting memories". For him, going back over the past is not a question of repairing the irreparable, but of keeping the memory of the painful past alive. For the grieving process to work, it is essential to face up to it and recognise it existed. On the same subject, Achille Mbembe uses Marc Bloch's term of the utopia of "not yet", not as a dream that will never come true but as a belief in a future that will come: Utopia as a state, as the result of the grieving process. Artists and writers symbolically attempt to heal the collective melancholy, moving away from the hegemonic selective memory, and instead turning to a multitude of individual memories that are often omitted or erased, and that concern the "Tout monde". In doing so, they choose pieces and highlight the machinations that dictate the omissions and oversights.

The artist Jean-François Boclé reconsiders a famously sinister but relatively unknown text in his work. The Code Noir⁴⁹ or Edit du Roy outlined the regulations for the "Gouvernement & l'Administration de Justice de la Police des Iles Françaises de l'Amérique, & pour la Discipline & le Commerce des Nègres & Esclaves dans ledit Pays, donné à Versailles au mois de Mars 1685". Boclé is from Martinique and says he had never heard of this legal document in class or read about it in history books. There was nothing about the sixty legal articles signed by Louis XIV and Colbert, that were in force from 1685 to 1848, where the status of "merchandise" and "chattels" was conferred on human beings. The artist revisits historical memory in his video performance piece *Tu me copieras* (2004), where he is seen dictating the text of Le Code Noir to a philosophy professor who isn't aware of the content. The artist writes out the text on a blackboard in white chalk until he fills the space. Why, he asks, has the Code Noir been given so little space in the dominant historical narrative? Because it tarnishes the other dominant memory, that of the Great Century of "The Sun King" and the Enlightenment. The artist criticises the "rhetoric that made one particular narrative a universal, global process, and that managed to block out the darker side of modernity, which leads to the permanent reproduction of coloniality".⁵⁰

Boclé exposes the memory of a history that is buried, and in doing so, questions the way history is written and rewritten. "But while it is true, as we will see", says Nietzsche in the second of his *Untimely Meditations* (1872), "we must seriously despise instruction without vitality, knowledge which enervates activity, and history as an expensive surplus of knowledge and a luxury, because we lack what is still most essential to us and because what is superfluous is hostile to what is essential. To be sure, we need history". But exactly what History do we need? How can the question be handled from

an artistic perspective? How effective can art be in activating historical memory?

Artists are not the historians of a universal history; on the contrary, they go beyond the universality that is imposed as the norm, against the dominant idea, and remain fragmentary or selective even while using what may be the same material as the historian. Artists transform history and politics into a poetic entity in the broadest sense. The artist Francis Aylis said: something poetic can sometimes become political, and something political can become poetic. In saying this, he underlined the paradox of the artistic, which is not exactly political, but the poetic character of which can have a political bent.



Image 4: Jean-François Boclé
Tu me copieras, 2004,
video and audio installation,
DVD (video played in a loop,
duration : 27' 30), wall school
blackboard, 270x110x30cm
(wood, piano hinges, blackboard
painting, writings on the black-
board white chalk), suspended
audio earphone, two speakers,
the "Code Noir" with preface of
the artist released to the public,
variable dimensions, solo show
I Did Not Discover America, Bild-
Museet, Umeå, Sweden, 2008. ©
Jean-François Boclé /Adagp.
© Jean-François Boclé /Adagp.

We can question how art and artists can contribute to highlighting erased memories and ignored stories. Those artists that navigate outside disciplines, practice, in their own way, what Walter Mignolo called "border thinking", a form of thinking that "is not controlled by states or university disciplines".⁵¹ As such, artists who think with emotions and reveal the fragilities of bodies and the buried memories of traumas, can make this "border thinking" possible.

Any artist/ historian who wishes to highlight tiny facts and silences, oversights and denials, is an ideal historian according to Walter Benjamin, one who should "carefully upturn our minds dearest habits" and who "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain".⁵²

51- Walter Mignolo, *Epistemic Disobedience*, op. cit., p. .

52- Walter Mignolo "Géopolitique de la sensibilité et du savoir. (Dé) colonialité, pensée frontalière et désobéissance épistémologique.

53- Walter Benjamin, "On the concept of history" (1940), *Illuminations: Essay and reflections*, 2019, First Mariner Books, p. 200.



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