

“I’M NOT A RACIST, I’M A REALIST”: THE ARCHIVE OF THE NON-RACIAL, AFRICA AND THE SOUTHERN ATLANTIC

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How do we get beneath the skin?

This seemed to me the objective of the theme, *archives of the non-racial*, yet in almost two weeks on the bus, the importance of skin was overwhelmingly returned to, overwhelmingly emphasized. That it should have been so is no surprise given the context of our discussion, a journey through a place marked overwhelmingly by epidermal scars – both of history and of those present. Unlike certain philosophical tropes or mathematical formulae, one cannot speak about race in a way that is neutral because simply by being seen one is marked. Yet ultimately there is a risk in this of repetitive dialogue that reaffirms again and again what one knows to be true.

In my theoretical and ethnographic work I have tried to find new perspectives, working from a hunch that in teaching young South Africans, simply repeating apartheid categories rubs against the grain. It is not that these categories don’t matter, but that the ‘born-frees’, as they are called with such saccharinity, are often themselves seeking different shapes of identity. Repeating what the older generation knows to be true in the classroom is therefore necessary for historical literacy, but at times appears to freeze the present, and importantly often ignores the rest of Africa, never mind most of the globe.

Changing perspective from and into South Africa, I went North-West. I began to look at Angola, a country known in South Africa as a place of war, trauma and

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terror, and I wondered ‘how do you fall in love? And when you have fallen in love, how do you dance, and to what music? What does race look like in a former Portuguese colony where millionaires wear gold on the streets of Luanda and the emergent middle class goes to Brazil to get their university degrees? What can we learn if we think about race with a Portuguese vocabulary from our location at the tip of Africa?’

Lusotropicalism is the most well-known of the theories of the post-racial to have emerged from within the Portuguese speaking world, and it is worth noting that it did so long before the idea of the non-racial was articulated in English. It argues, very simply, that thanks to a happy proclivity of sex facilitated by the warm climates of the Portuguese colonies, racial mixing quickly occurred within the Southern Atlantic spaces of the former Portuguese empire and the ‘problem’ of race barely had time to be seen before it was suffocated out through orgasm (Boxer, 1961; Freyre, 1933; Simões, 2011; Telles, 2005).

This said, the Portuguese themselves were only reluctantly considered ‘white’ according to European racial hierarchies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Almeida, 2004), and only grudgingly accepted as such in South Africa in the twentieth (Bethencourt & Pearce, 2012; Glaser, 2010) – yet they were undoubtedly European, and their maritime empire was profoundly important for the development of pre-industrial revolution modernity.

This empire left powerful traces that form an important ‘archive of the non-racial’ extending from the 15th century to the present (Paquette, 2013; Santos, 2002; Thornton, 2012) that overlaps that of South Africa, but

also poses different questions of scholarship and lived experience. Let me illustrate ethnographically, and here I draw from 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Angola and in Brazil between 2011 and 2014.

Cine Kalunga, in Benguela, Angola, is a colonial era open-air cinema recently resuscitated and sometimes used as a concert venue. In early February of this year, the well-known Angolan musician Yannick Afroman gave a performance there. My friends and I arrived late, and worked our way up the crowded, sloped seating arena, being careful not to knock either our own or others’ drinks into what appeared a sea of gleaming electronic-tablet screens aimed at the stage and set to record. Not long after, in his rendition of the song ‘Eu Não Sou Racista, Sou Realista’ (meaning ‘I am not a Racist, I am a Realist’), the artist gave the most succinct summary of the theory of Lusotropicalism and its critiques that I have come across. “In Angola” he sang, “the only things we don’t have complexes about are drinks and sex.” You may have a party, and you may sleep with whomever you desire, but beyond that social stratification is both somber and sober.

The ironies of the challenge to the non-racial presented by the Lusophone case are captured further in the same song, the refrain of which speaks to the ‘need’ for a ‘moral lesson’ that might free Angolans ‘from mental slavery’² – the very condition that modernity is supposed to have done away with via the tools of democracy and freedom, predicated on an equal – and legal – understanding of ‘the human.’ After performing this song Afroman spoke to the audience and assured us he was okay with the Portuguese being back in Angola given the cold and the state of the economy ‘up north’, though he admitted he was uncomfortable with the Chinese and briefly suggested they might want to

go home. Quickly returning to his Lusophone ‘brothers from Portugal’, he asked where in the audience they were. “*Caralho*” he said into his microphone – a distinctly Brazilian word for the love-making expletive – “and the first Portuguese to stand up is a black³!!”

Sinophobia at an Angolan rock concert in 2014 speaks as much to economics as it does to race, and today as ever the two remain closely imbricated – complicated in Angola by a state wrestling with its own understanding of the values of human populace as it transitions from socialism to capitalism. A recurring response in answer to the question ‘Is Angola capitalist or socialist today?’ is “nos estamos ainda em uma aprendizagem para capitalismo” – *we are still in an apprenticeship/a learning of capitalism*. Yet learning capitalism from whom? Apprenticed to what? In this learning, what is the capital of capitalism that will be valued and traded? And what does this have to do with skin?

This debate is anchored in a long history in which a ‘mixed’ elite emerged on Africa’s South-West coast that assumed political and economic control that they have maintained successfully to this day (Birmingham, 2012; Corrado, 2008; Ovadia, 2011; Pimenta, 2012; Thornton, 2012). Almost exclusively Catholic, it grew out of a trade across what Alberto Costa da Silva provocatively refers to as ‘a river called the Atlantic’ (Costa da Silva, 2003), and who/what crossed the ‘river’ the most was slaves⁴.

In the years that followed the abolition of slavery, Brazil developed an international reputation as a country that had ‘solved’ race issues through its welcoming of racial mixture, whilst largely erasing a history in which genocide and domination were key (Alexandre, 2011; Frye, 2000; Maciel, Primeiro, & Brookshaw, 2007). This history was finally forced into sharp focus at the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban in

2009 (Telles, 2005). This latter event reminds us that South Africa’s extreme experiences of racial separation at times allow the country to hold up a kind of magic mirror to the world, in which other states have been forced to regard themselves more truthfully. This kind of mirroring was perhaps the purpose of the JWTC bus, though we did not give very much space to discuss it.

Many Angolans who travel to Brazil describe becoming conscious of race in new ways whilst there. It is the country with the largest population of ‘black’ people⁵ outside of Nigeria, and yet because of the denialism that Lusotropicalism allowed, it is only in recent years that a sense of ‘black consciousness’ has become possible to articulate (Ramos, 2010) outside of and beyond the sphere of slave descent. Lusophone migrant’s contribution to this dialogue within Brazil has been significant.

I saw this in action some weeks ago when at a protest against racial stereotyping in mainstream media an Angolan student grabbed the microphone and said “we are all black brothers, united against the tyranny of other people deciding who we are – they do not understand us!” We, in this case, are black people of the Southern Atlantic, they the ‘white’ leaders of Brazil’s *Globo* media powerhouse. Yet most of the people gathered furiously in the square would not be considered black in South Africa, and even the whiteness of the *Globo*’s elite would be called up to question with an apartheid era ruler. This is the madness of the epidermal scars that are lived each day in South Africa, where judging on sight so often turns us blind (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

Let me give one final ethnographic insight this time returning to Angola. I was asked by a friend who ran the local campus of an inter-luso-national private university, to do a workshop with his professors on research methods and publication. “Tell them what

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science means” he implored me, “we are all learning how to ask questions after the war”. Angola is a strongly Christian country, and as part of the workshop I said, “Let’s speak about Islam – who are Muslims?” And like in many discussions I had already had there, I heard a narrative of terrorist oppression and stereotype. Then I showed a picture of an obliging friend of ambiguous racial origin with clear eyes and a smile, and asked who he was, and they said he is a nice young man with a good future ahead of him, and I told them about his kindness and intelligence and they nodded with warmth. “He’s from Turkey” I mentioned after a time, and there was a stunned silence before an elderly teacher asked with some incredulity “that means he is a Muslim?”

My point is that, to echo NoViolet Bulawayo, we need new names (Bulawayo, 2011). Whilst this iteration of the JWTC was very successful in engaging literatures and experiences from the South Africa and the United States, and gave space for some discussion of Jamaica and Australia, I do not think that we as scholars can afford to ignore Africa, nor “the East,” nor Central and Southern America. If we hope to equip our students for citizenship in a time of drones and Ebola, fracking and ISIL and Ferguson and Marikana, in a world that is hotter and hotter and intimately, amorously, connected, we have to go deeper than skin

As the case of Angola illustrates, vast ‘archives’ exist in the rest of the continent that not only can, but must, be explored if South Africa is to continue to offer tools of racial reflection to those who look in. If we don’t use these tools, we run the risk of becoming a traumatized nation constantly opening our bandages to look at our

wounds, of showing these wounds to trusted friends who we know will give us sympathy, and in the process we run the risk of failures in observation. Just as Angola is so much more than a war-torn corrupt petro-capitalist site of suffering, so too is South Africa – and it has always been – much more than a four-category construction of neatly racialized spaces and neatly pigmented bodies, and I think that we need to reflect on that. As we all like to tell undergrads, the argument must be contextualized, and in this case, I suggest some contextualization with reference to Africa. And we should also acknowledge that members of the new generation, who are learning in a time of unprecedented global mobility, have been making a lot of love.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In Portuguese: “Em Angola, só não temos complexos na bebida e no sexo” (for lyrics see Afroman, 2009).
- 2 “Eu não sou racista sou realista/ Mwangolé precisa de uma lição de moral/para se libertar da escravidão mental” trans. ‘I am not a racist but a realist/Angolans need a moral lesson/to liberate them from mental slavery.’
- 3 “A primeira Tuga (colloq. Portuguese) levantado é um preto”! [fieldwork notes 08.02.2014]
- 4 The Portuguese at the time, however, were themselves ‘enslaved’ by debt to the British, and a messy, violent form of emergent capitalism took hold, held together by a broad cultural rubric known (and critiqued) as Lusofonia (Arenas, 2005; Lourenço, 1999; Margaridol, 2011) – the spreading of a particularly ‘Portuguese’ culture encapsulated by language
- 5 Classification is often contested, see (Telles, 2005)

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