

10.2 **Reframing colonial narratives: Notes about Post-photography**

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× **Abstract**

What can an artist do on the edge of the abyss? And how can the image make reflections vibrate, embracing the wealth and diversity of life forms? This article starts from my archive, in which I immersed in a year of introspection, to extract politic and poetic forms from the cartographic conjuncture that led me to inhabit, two lands intrinsically connected by the expansionism of modern history: Portugal and Brazil. The article presents a hybrid and existential reflection on the potential of images that point to paths, or “resolutive” images, a term used by the farmer and quilombola leader Antônio Bispo do Rosário. Exploring the reversing process in which audiovisual cultural products are usually extraverted from the West to the Rest (Hall, 1992), this article aims to probe vernacular narratives as privileged sites of inquiry for the study of post-colonial issues which remain as points of tension between Portugal and its former colonies. Using an aesthetic approach supported by historical, political and social investigations of post-photography, this article will promote equivalence between this archive and contemporary issues of decolonization and consciousness in a globalized world.

Keywords: pos-photography, hybrid photography, archive and decolonization

1. **Introduction**

This essay is mobilized by the encounter with my photographic archive and the ways to revisit it, which allowed me to think, in a distinct and complementary way, about the existing relationships between the collection, the archive, as indigenous narratives, colonization and Photography (understood as technique and technology). The main objective is, from its interdisciplinary dialogue with languages such as cinema, painting and comics, to reflect on the archive about the possibilities of opening a space for reflection on the decolonization of photographs. This text reveals the path and creative process inherent in the creation of the project “Transa, Ballads of the last sun” which condenses a visual series in exhibition and photobook format, about contemporary visual practices that problematize as hybrid forms of Photography with different languages².

During my PHD research of in Visual Communication, I spent the last decade living between my homeland, Portugal and Brazil, entering the giant of the tropics in an increasingly centripetal movement – from academia to the North-eastern hinterland and from photography to the lights and shadows of the Amazonia jungle. While interacting with several cultural, social and economic realities, ultimately the guiding principle between the polyphony of roles, actions and stimuli that she took on along the way became her perceptual body, assisted by the photographic device. More than ten years of transatlantic experiences built a visual body

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of work which is at times documentary, at times anthropological, and increasingly driven by an affective, sensible and poetic gaze. The ethnographic distance began to give way to miscegenation (cultural, artistic, identity) and, today, faced with the stagnation of the capitalist voracity caused by the globalized pandemic, I decided to study my collection to draw links between my photographic archive and contemporary issues about decolonization and awareness in a globalized world.

In the vastness of the Amazonia Forest, “*Transa*, Ballads of the last sun” invites us to an aesthetic and existential dance through the hybridity of photography and surprises us with indigenous myths and tales, in a personification of the creative and fertilizing grace of nature. In this crossing, in the encounter with the original communities thrown to the edges of the world, reflections vibrate on the concept of the Man who lives detached from the Earth, which suppresses diversity, which denies the plurality of life forms. The ones that still cling to this Earth are those that were forgotten by the edges of the planet, the ancestral and original peoples who live in a sovereign and full encounter with nature.



► Figure 10.2.1 - Igarapé, Amazonia, 2019
► Source: author's archive

On this project I tried to stir up the waters of an “*Earth in Trance*”³ and dare to create a transgressive imaginary over the place of the artist, who lives permanently on the edge of the abyss. This risk threshold establishes the place par excellence of art, as it indicates danger, the breach that sets the intrusion of misfortune into perfect beauty. And how is it possible to see beauty, when everything burns, and human beings insist on proving their blindness over what is essential? In this dimension, the artist, with his distinctive way of seeing, may shake the apparatus, trying to invent “possible worlds” and renew a meaning for existence.

In *Transa* I tried to bring to the field of art the political gesture of propagating allegories that hover in limbo, not only between the documentary and the fictional, but between times, between histories and geographies, between pasts and futures, between Portugal and Brazil. Here I develop an artistic practice committed to the present of indigenous communities, in accordance with the precepts of Hélio Oiticica (Brazil, 1937-1980) who, in 1967, was one of the voices in defense of the critical and intervening role of the artists and questioned the

3. “*Land in Trance*” borrows its title from the film script- ed and directed by Glauber Rocha, released in the late 1960s in Brazil.

definitions of the beauty, the contemplative and the materiality of art itself, proposing an ethical-political imperative for artistic action.

At the same time, in recent years, there has been greater access and growing interest in the archives produced by the colonizing European countries and, when they have been preserved, in the archives of the countries that became independent. This interest is due, in some cases, to the end of legal barriers that prevented access to or dissemination of the archives, and because, after several decades of decolonization processes, which caused trauma and misunderstanding among the actors of the various factions, a new generation of academics and non-academics, namely artists, seeks to better understand these stories. Thus, in literature, journalism, cinema, anthropology, the history of science, photography, and the arts, among theorists, as among artists and other protagonists of the world of culture, the critical work on these documents of the 20th century contemporary history, whose effects are beginning to be felt.

This essay does not intend to carry out this survey, but to include personal reflections on the transversality of the work, with reference to some works by contemporary artists who work on colonial memory and the processes of decolonization in post-colonial times. For its elaboration I based myself on the concept of “resolutive” images, or images that point out paths, a term brought up by farmer and quilombola leader Antônio Bispo do Rosário (2018) and on the poetic or compositional thought of Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva (2016):

[...] When dealing with the similar, one inevitably looks for symmetry, that is, correspondences. By expecting symmetry - or looking for similarities - it is possible to imagine (recompose) the context under observation as a fractal figure. That is, instead of looking for causal (linear) connections, compositional thinking seeks to identify a pattern that repeats itself at different scales.”

(Silva, 2016, pp. 408-409).

The archive as a place to keep the past can be understood as a modality of access to collections, not of the past, but of the common, of what constitutes us as subjects in the present and in the future. Images from the past constitute us today. The fold in chronological time, performed by Paulino in *¿História Natural?* (2018) is the result of an iconoclastic and resolute gesture, which decolonizes collections, archives, photographs, what we know and how we know the past. This gesture reveals to us that it is possible to decolonize the colonial images that inhabit the archives and that decolonizing them is an ethical-political attribution of the present in the name of an individual and collective symbolic-political emancipation.

2. About the Creative Process of “Transa” and its hybridism



► Figure 10.2.2 - Views of the Artistic Book
► Nynhã Aba, 2016

467

In 2016, as part of my research, I presented the artist's book "*Nynhã Aba*" (Indian Heart), from which I articulated an "aesthetics of affection". Every detail of the book conveyed a love relationship that I developed with the images.

Following the artistic and "alchemical" process of each element as its own story – instant photographs, some colored by me, others intervened by indigenous children, drawings, photographs from historical archives – I searched an interactive book for the emanation of care, of the time, and the desire to retain the link between those who look at the image that returns the same look, in an attempt to generate the same connection, or the same affirmation of its otherness. The aesthetics of affection produced mirror images. In *Transa*, I opened the process to experimentation to create a hybrid and multidisciplinary work that uses photography, literature, comics, painting and cinema, incorporating various artisanal, digital, analog and sculptural resources, building an inspired path by the aesthetics of affection, but also, possibly, the opposite of the previous work.



► Figure 10.2.3 - Views of the *Transa* photobook, *Ballads of the last sun*, 2020
 ► Source: author's archive

Here, the look is retrospective and experimental and part of a dive of a photographic archive and a body of transatlantic experiences with more than ten years of sedimentation. This implies a dual perceptual movement from the inside out, and from the outside to the inside. In *Transa*, therefore, the narrative construction opens the way for a polyphonic creation that goes beyond and combines the technical and linguistic specificities of each artistic sphere.

The linear and chronological continuity is broken, and autonomous and combinable narratives emerge as fragmented subtexts like islands in an archipelago of questions, sighs and meanings. In this hybrid, mobile cartography, the dominant ecosystem is the space 'between': between-times, between-techniques, between-ethnicities, between-species, between-languages, between-formats, between screams and whispers, reality and fiction, sadness and exaltation. Here I deepened my research on the hybrid forms of photography, developing formal and conceptual strategies to interconnect between spaces and build an inventory of uses and meanings.

A crucial element is the invocation of the figure of Iracema, the "virgin with the lips of honey" in the novel by José de Alencar, a Tabajara indigenous woman who represents the purity, trust and surrender of virgin land. comic book by the famous Lenda do Ceará, in the exhibition the presence of Iracema is felt in an unforgettable way through a subtle and insightful gesture: a crystallized tear denotes the sadness of abandonment in her eyes, detail of a dark image, of black background, appropriated from a frame from the film by Carlos Coimbra (Iracema, 1975).

Transa seeks to trace both the desire and drive of the indigenous figure of Iracema, the "virgin with honey lips" of the Brazilian novel, written by José de Alencar, in 1865. In "Iracema", Alencar brings a poetic explanation for the origins of his homeland, hence the subtitle of the work - Legend of Ceará. Iracema, became a symbol of Ceará and her son, Moacir, born out of her love with the Portuguese colonist Martim, represents the fruit of the union between the two races. History is a representation of what happened to America at the time of the European colonisation and which, in the scheme foreseen by history, leads to Iracema's sacrifice, as a harbinger of its extermination.

The myth of Iracema, emerges as a theme for reflection on contemporary existence, threatened by the limbo and brutality of the colonial processes that are now reversing themselves. The Earth, in this suspended time, seems to echo a deaf cry which brings together all the "civilizing forces together - the repressive and the subaltern, those in majority history and the minorities, the woman, the black, the indigenous, the settler.



► Figure 10.2.4 - Photogram of the film by Carlos Coimbra (Iracema, 1975)
 ► Source: author's archive

In this *Transa* I appeal to a resignification of the present time, in a poetic and introspective attempt to capture (and retain) the irreversible course of time and all the brutal events that still remain in history, in a dizzying world of disputes, creation and destruction of landscapes, of erasure of existences in a race to the abyss of entropy.

In a passage between the aesthetic and the political, experience and the hybridism of languages are the motto and impulse for the different ways of seeing, hearing and feeling the world. In fact, photography exists by trying to establish a relationship of mirroring, to stir up the ghost of a presence. And this mixture of confession and hybridity shows a physicality as aggressive as it is melancholic.

In the assembly of these images - as in the between lines of a text - a fragmentary fiction pulses. Elements based on real facts, the deep attraction for the Amazonia Forest, invites us to enter into stories of drama, conquests and revelations, in a kind of romance that hovers in a limbo, not only between the documentary and the fictional, but between times, between stories and geographies, between the past and the future, between Portugal and Brazil, between despair and faith, love and hate, guilt and vengeance, screams and whispers. By stumbling on the flaws of photography and attacking the speculative game of appearances I seek to transgress codes, free our perception for an adventure which dares to a more complex and delirious apprehension of the world.



► Figure 10.2.5 - Ôca, in infrared, author's collection, 2020
 ► Source: author's archive

The images contained in boxes that in turn contain *urucum* powder, among other native pigments, establish a game with the possibilities of the perception of the eye, and of the imagination. Moving the boxes sideways, we cover one more side of the image and unearth another, and vice versa. The story is alive and in constant construction. Thus, in this work, the elements that are currently fighting the threat of their own extinction were transformed into X-rays, radiographs of souls that will whisper in our ears, flying over the burnt and flat lands of the Amazonia, empty of its dense tropical flora and fauna, if things continue to move in the direction they are going.

Claudia Andujar has been fighting for more than five decades for the protection of the Indigenous and the healthy ecosystem, native to the Amazonia, Brazil, and the world. The infrared fuchsia of his unforgettable 1976 masterpiece, the longhouse on the *Catrimani* River, surrounded by a jungle as protective as it is vulnerable, comes to mind in these images, which, here, are marked by the same aesthetic gesture.



► Figure 10.2.6 - Crystal boxes, author's collection, 2020
► Source: author's archive

There are gestures – because these intervention strategies on the photographic image are gestures of identification, estrangement and classification – that bring to consciousness the thought about the magic and dream-likeness of Glauber Rocha's second and last manifesto. Faced with the impotence and perplexity with the political direction of Brazil after the gulp of 1964, the horror of the military dictatorships, the political and conscience trance, the total loss of freedom, Glauber turns to a new question, the same one that guides the restlessness in *Transa – Ballads of the Last Sun*: it doesn't make sense to fight in the field of oppressive reason, but in the territories of unreason, the absurd and the myth. But instead of transgressive violence, to cross the numbness of meaning and sensitivity, here I appeal to the gestures of the aesthetics of affection and insert a crystal tear in Iracema's eye, filling with light everything that seems to be being thrown to the dark edges of abandonment and oblivion.

History will continue to insist: Iracema's tear challenges us with pain and love and leaves us speechless: we will not be able to forget it. And so be it. This is a gesture that once again opens the image to multiplicity, by exposing colonial violence covered up and naturalized by historical narratives.

This exercise in the production of a new visuality that I realized with a single photographic image has been a constant practice in contemporary artistic productions. Artists have made use of colonial photographs as elements for the composition of new images, which are in themselves 'resolutive'. Antônio Bispo dos santos (2018, p. 114) calls resolutive images those used as defense in moments of attack. These are not images aimed at subjugation, the possession of a body or territory. They do not fulfill the imperial desire to make 'my property' what belongs to others. Rather, they are images used as weapons of defense against the imperial attacks of yesterday and today. Images, says Bispo (118), are instruments of power and resolutive images are those that put pressure on colonial images, which participate in the struggle for individual and collective decolonization and symbolic-political emancipation.



► Figure 10.2.7 - Views of the crystal box, intervened with the placement of crystals, in place of the tear of Iracema, author's collection, 2020
 ► Source: author's archive

3. Some notes about the photobook and possible conclusions

In a transit between the aesthetic and the political, experimentation and the hybridity of languages are the motto and impulse for the construction of the photobook that sought to hear the silenced screams of history and enter chaos – the latter a more difficult exercise, because chaos lives in our core. This chaos, which, according to the testimony of Ailton Krenak, indigenous leader and Brazilian activist, “we must learn to transform into dance” appears as an instrument of reflection and awareness by opening up to the possibilities of reviewing the discourses of decolonization. Opening the file is, therefore, entering chaos. The history of colonization and the echoes of its effects in the present, summoned by the figure of Iracema, an indigenous woman who in José de Alencar’s novel represents the purity, trust and delivery of virgin land – now appear in the form of redemption in the hybrid mirror here proposed.

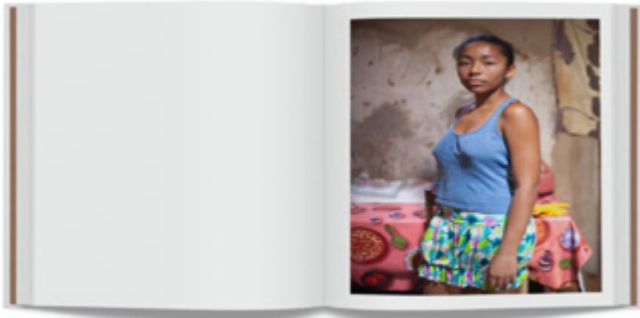


► Figure 10.2.8 - Views of the interior of the book and inclusion of the comic book *Iracema em Transa, ballads of the last sun* (2020)
 ► Source: author's archive

The media intoxicate each other, and the most interesting thing about this intoxication is not the mere technological transfusion, but the conceptual one, in the light of the “Pandora’s Chamber” (Fontcuberta, 2010). In the montage of these images – as between the lines of a text – a fragmentary fiction pulses. Elements based on real facts, the deep attraction for the Amazonia Forest, are an invitation to enter stories of drama, conquests and revelations, in a kind of romance that hovers in limbo, not only between the documentary and the fictional, but between times, between histories and geographies, between past and future, between Portugal and Brazil, between despair and faith, love and hate, guilt and revenge, screams and whispers.



► Figures 10.2.9 – Views of the comic book *Iracema* included in the book *Transa, ballads of the last sun*, 2020
 ► Source: author's archive



- ▶ Figure 10.2.10 - Views of the comic book *Iracema* included in the book *Transa, ballads of the last sun*, 2020
- ▶ Source: author's archive

Realizing this mixture between real and fiction intrinsic to photography, based on the visual production of several artists, Fontcuberta (1977) proposes the concept of contravision, taken up 20 years later in his book “The Kiss of Judas: photography and truth”. For the author, the contradiction “breaks the internal logic of the structure of verbal language”, which in photography would be given by contravision, since: “artistic activity, that is, creative expression has two aspects. On the one hand, it contributes to the development of a certain plasticity, providing new linguistic solutions. On the other hand, it must transcend the social, that is, it must respond to the socio-political demands of the environment in which the artist develops”. (Fontcuberta, 1997, p. 28).

By stumbling over photography's flaws and attacking the specular game of appearances, “Transa, Baladas do last sun” seeks to transgress codes, freeing our perception for an adventure that dares a more complex and delirious apprehension of the world. Far from being a lament, it supports the need to deconstruct historical narratives, invert the romanticized vision of indigenous nations, stimulating thinking and imagining the more global meaning of the experience, beyond the labels of progress and civilizational advances. The artistic intersection seems to draw a possible hope by allowing the crossing of personal memories, with post-memories and memories of the memories of others, social representations that resist in time. And here, Photography, as an instrument of expression and imagination, can bring new attention or elevate transnational and transcultural identities, deconstructing myths from colonial narratives.

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