

UNDESIRABLE SOUNDS, UNDESIRABLE IMAGES: THE RACIALIZATION OF FANTASIES AND THE FANTASIES OF RACIALIZATION*

*SONS E IMAGENS INDESEJÁVEIS: A RACIALIZAÇÃO DAS FANTASIAS E AS FANTASIAS DA RACIALIZAÇÃO***

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Abstract: This paper looks at undesired images and sounds that structure and inhabit what is seen and heard to analyze how they infuse and are infused by our fantasies. It attempts to investigate these issues by focusing primarily on the racial aspect of fantasy. I ask: how do racial fantasies populate and influence manners of seeing, hearing and thinking? I do so by looking at three cases whereby different authors (David Marriott, Fred Moten and Tina Campt) narrate instances where not only the unknown, unseen and unheard are fundamental for the “making sense” of the world, but also the undesirable.

Keywords: Fetishism; Fantasy; Sounding-Image, Sound.

Resumo: Este artigo atenta-se para as imagens e sons indesejáveis que estruturam e habitam o que é visto e ouvido a fim de analisar como tais imagens e sons inculcam e são inculcados por nossas fantasias. O trabalho busca investigar tais questões concentrando-se primariamente nos aspectos raciais da fantasia. Pergunto: como que fantasias raciais colonizam e influenciam maneiras de enxergar, ouvir e pensar: Faço isso com o auxílio de três casos, narrados por três autores diferentes (David Marriott, Fred Moten e Tina Campt), onde não só o desconhecido, o não-visto e o não-escutado são fundamentais para a construção de sentido, mas também o indesejável.

Palavras-chave: Fetichismo; Fantasia; Imagem Sonora; Som.

“É preciso partir de um profundo ateísmo para se chegar à ideia de Deus”

(Oswald de Andrade, Manifesto Antropófago)

Introduction

In the beginning of his book, “Haunted Life”, David Marriott narrates the story of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor, a young black south Londoner who, on 27 November 2000, was stabbed to death. A few minutes prior to his death - some of his last – he was recorded by closed-circuit television footage, giving a glimpse of a young and playful life. The first images of the recording, broadcasted by the BBC, show Taylor “as he jumps across the stones

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of some civic sculpture” suggesting a boy that “is at play with himself, and perhaps with the image of himself, as he repossesses the civic space until it becomes the space of the imaginary”(Marriott 2007:xi). As Marriott explains, at a given moment the boy disappears from the camera’s view only to be found 15 minutes later by a passerby who sees him stabbed and “bleeding profusely”(Marriott 2007:xiii). The life that occurs between the moment that was taped and the event that killed Taylor are not recorded. They are unseen by the spectator. But the viewing public is called upon, is interpellated, to imagine both the unseen life and the killing of (another) black child. Life and death unite in this audio-visual enticement, where spectators are asked to creatively elaborate, or to dream up, images and sounds capable of telling the unseen and unheard story of (a) black existence.

According to Marriott, the CCTV footage of the 10-year-old’s last minutes – someone who, given his race and age, was “an immediate target of suspicion”(Marriott 2007:xi) –, calls attention to that which cannot be seen or heard in the recording and yet structure the very way we see and hear it. And what exactly are these invisible and inaudible elements? Perhaps one way to answer this would be to point to all the images and sounds that, although not directly “seen” or “heard”, still orient our imagination, still frame life and death. And this is somewhat the path I will take throughout the paper to investigate the interplay between fantasy and the (un)desirable in the makings of specific images. Specifically, images that speak, or “speaking-images”.

A speaking-image can be understood in two ways for the purposes of this paper. On the one hand we can understand it as, the televisual or cinematic image which is characterized by a specific type of contract: the audio-visual contract (Chion 1994). In televisual broadcasts, for instance, voice-overs are used to direct us, to explain what we should be looking for, as well as how we should be feeling about the image we are seeing. Events are framed, delimited and defined by both the contours of the camera and the narrative which accompanies it. Somewhat like the televisual, dreams could also be understood as an instance of “speaking-images”². In them, the dream-work uses visual forms and sounds to manifest dormant or sometimes concealed desires and intentions(Freud 2010). But if a voice-over directs the televisual, who/what directs dreams? As I will attempt to explicate, both the televisual and

² “Dreams are a production of images, similar to a private film. In this exclusive movie theater, our best and worst terror-romances, dark-humor comedies, and intimate existential tragedies are exhibited”(Dunker 2017:17–18)

dreams are not only connected, but very much structured by similar operating processes. Fundamentally, for the purposes of this paper, both function through both the production and mediation of fantasy.

But what exactly do we mean by fantasy? Fantasy here has to be understood with Dolar, for whom it “functions as a provisional understanding of something which eludes understanding”(Dolar 2006:136). In other words, fantasy is an elaboration which emerges from and within the gap opened by the encounter between the Real and the Symbolic; or the contingent and the structure(Levi-Strauss 1966). As Dolar understands it, fantasies are defensive structures against the unknown and therefore against the “excessive nature of the initial moment”(Dolar 2006:136). Fantasies, thus, are elaborations driven by the desire to know and frame the unknown, but predicated and based on feelings, images and sounds that are undesirable. Once elaborated, fantasy works in tandem as well as in opposition to understanding: “when the subject does finally understand, at the supposed moment of conclusion, it is always-already too late, everything has happened in between: the new understanding cannot dislodge and supplant fantasy – on the contrary, it necessarily becomes its prolongation and supplement, its hostage.”(Dolar 2006:137).

Following Marriott cum Dolar, then, I am interested in trying to think about the undesired images and sounds that structure and inhabit what is seen and heard, and, along those lines, how they infuse and are infused by fantasies. Throughout the paper I try to investigate these issues by focusing primarily on the racial aspect of fantasy. I do so by looking at three cases in which different authors (David Marriott, Fred Moten and Tina Campt) narrate instances where not only the unknown, unseen and unheard are fundamental for the “making sense” of the world, but also the undesirable. The latter (the undesirable) can be understood here with Sianne Ngai, who sees in negative and “ugly” feelings significant sites for understanding the contradictory and conflictive nature of collective life. As she explains: ugly feelings are “open to radically conflicting developments”(Ngai 2005:4). Ngai’s investigation pays more attention to what she believes to be the understudied “ugly feelings”: the less intense and more ongoing affects, such as envy and animatedness, in opposition to the more studied and irruptive feelings, such as the sublime. However, here again I am closer to Marriott since I pay more attention to the ugly, undesirable, feelings that are intense. For Marriott, there is a potent connection between the spectacular, the fascinating and the ongoing stillness of racial fantasy. As he points out, fascinations and shocks convert singularity into

petrified stillness by reducing singular events - such as the death of a child - to “reproduced images of murdered children”(Marriott 2007:xiv–xv). In other words, there is an intimacy that is required and solicited by racial fantasy which seeks to turn into (back)ground the figures of the “utterly ordinary ambiance of catastrophe”(Marriott 2007:xvi).

The paper therefore tries to think “about what happens when fantasy and race combine as ways of seeing the unseeable”, as ways of hearing the inaudible and of desiring the undesirable (Marriott 2007:xvi). With Marriott, I think of race here as “a kind of shareable darkness, as a sort of death plot in the mind – or ghosted unconsciousness – driving both intimacy and desire, **shadowing** what we see and know.”(Marriott 2007:xxii). And to get at how the connections between race and fantasy might operate concretely, I begin with a case narrated by Marriott himself, wherein he depicts and analyzes lynching as a primal scene for American racial fantasies.

1. Primal scene(s) of racial fantasy

David Marriot’s “*On Black Men*”(2000) gives us a glimpse of how culture – and cultural works – creates and maintains its own forms of “phobic objects”. That is: “a sight to be kept outside but, and crucially, [an] image [that] is also trying to force its way in: after all, unless we close our eyes, we cannot help but register what we see.”(Marriott 2000:27). Specifically, his book assesses the “symbolic role of black men in the psychic life of culture” as the representatives or instantiations of phobia. He does so by engaging with photographs, histories and sounds of violence that create this imaginal and (un)desired object: an object inscribed as and introjected onto the black male body(Marriott 2000:vii). By looking at photographs of lynchings and listening to their stories, stories that even cameras refused to register, he investigates laws “that operate through visual [and auditory] terror”(Marriott 2000:9).

Marriot begins this book with a scene of a lynching as rendered by one of its survivors. James Cameron , accused of rape and murder, was set to be hung on August of 1930, in Marion, Indiana. Before him, two other black men had already been beaten and hung, while the mob of white people - according to Cameron around 15,000 people - waited for Cameron’s demise. After being beaten, spat on, and carried to the stage where he was to be hung, he heard a voice, “echo-like, as if from a long way off – which came to intervene in his fate.”(Marriott 2000:2). Fifty years later, as Cameron searched for material to remember and

document this almost divine intervention he writes that no one “said they heard that voice”(Marriott 2000:2). The voice, real or imagined, nonetheless composed the memory of what is otherwise usually depicted by photographs. If lynchings usually appear in culture as still frames, this voice from a beyond produces motion in the imagetic framing present in Cameron’s memory. But could we not say that there are voices in at least some pictorial representations?

Photographs, Marriott explains, play a significant role “in the history, and experience, of lynching in the United States”(Marriott 2000:5). They tend to “document the truth of lynching as both trauma and gala: a show for the white men, women and children before whom it is staged.”(Marriott 2000:5). In the act of photographing - a lynching in this case, but in general of photographing race as such – there is a compulsion that directs the camera to register the black body as specific kind of fetish(Marriott 2000:12). It is a compulsion that is generated by the continuous link between (white) scopical pleasures and their consequent racial fantasies. These fantasies, in turn, are driven and supported by white anxieties concerning black sexuality: “a race hatred predicated on an identification between blackness and sexual guilt, an identification which generates the sadistic desire to witness the spectacle – the stench – of emasculated black men slowly bleeding to death.”(Marriott 2000:9).

What is significant here is that photographic images of lynchings, as much as they violate, disfigure and act as “reflections of the racial scopophilia driving their working”, also produce a kind of blindness, or distortion, which disavows the “reality”, or, in Fanon’s rendering, the everyday experience, of black men(Marriott 2000:34). That, in Marriott’s understanding, spells out the grammar of racial fetishism: the unseen, the blind spot, is nonetheless what is passed on and what structures the desire of the white world.

These fantasies as spectacle – or spectacles of fantasy - are the driving force behind the pictures which register not only the lynching, but the smiling, posing, and pointing that tend to accompany such photos. The photo, then, seems to signify more than a memory: it seeks to demarcate place and even invoke envy (of those who are not present). After all, the images register moments where people gathered in order to *see together*, to share an occasion of importance, and to do so from a specific vantage point. Or, in other words, if the scene of a lynching is already designed to allow people to share in a particular process seeing, the photograph captures not only the moment or the scene, but fundamentally the desirous gaze

that directs what is meant to be shared. What is not seen in the photo, then, is also what allows it to speak: we don't see the gaze or the desire that directs it, and yet it frames the beating, the act of castration, the hanging as well as the photographic capture.

This is perhaps why Marriot understands lynchings as the primal scene or vestibular fantasy of American culture. It is there that anxieties about one's own and the Other's desire is worked out. For instance, as photographs of lynchings show the pleasures "of the mob: grinning, pointing, challenging" they invite and deviate the gaze towards white desire (Marriott 2000:4). And this invokes another kind of sharing. Marriot proposes that a black child, even when not exposed to the actual images of lynchings, takes up the "burden" of being "fatally exposed to the glare of those phobic anxieties constructed upon his visual image" (Marriott 2000:13). These shared images, then, constitute an expectation qua fantasy that directs and therefore makes demands upon desires not just of but for a type of collective life. A life based on specific forms of death.

If images of lynchings, qua photographs of black men, qua violated phobic objects, populate the collective, or shared, imaginary of America, could we not say that they also conjure anticipations, prospects, promises of sound? And if so, could we not also say that "voice" and "sound" are stand-ins for the fantastical aspects of what is meant to depict the real? What, then, would be the undesirable, yet desired, sounds that allow for racial fantasy?

Perhaps this could be better understood, in a somewhat tortuous way, if we connect the question to the kinds of fantasies and spectacles that cinema both shapes and draws upon to "enliven" the spectator's imagination. Films, as we know, are "moving pictures". But they are also "moving-pictures-with-sounds". The importance of sound for images, and for sounds in/as fantasies, can therefore be understood using film theorist Michel Chion's(1994) notion of the audio-visual contract. As he points out, sound is what gives films a texture. That is: a palpable, because material, sensation. According to him, sound is what augments or enhances our immersion in the simulacrum that films are: sound, in other words, is what materializes, embodies or reverberates films-as-fantasy (Chion 1994:144). Like films, fantasy tends to convey the world through artifices that make us feel the "reality of a scene"(Chion 1994:114). Both films and fantasy do so by exaggerating, contrasting, and augmenting sensations by the use of the tools they have at their disposal. Images and sounds, thus, do the work of what is absent: smell, taste, touch, etc.

But sound is also used to denote, or depict, the absence of images in films. For instance, sound allows us to bear witness to that which we do not want to see in a film: “everyone knows that the classical sound film, which avoided showing certain things, called on sound to come to the rescue. Sound suggested the forbidden sight in a much more frightening way than if viewers were to see the spectacle with their own eyes.”(Chion 1994:22). As that which speaks of and calls forward the prohibited, sound instantiates an image, or perhaps what is worse: the lack of an image, for terror. In other words, sound-without-image indicates a terror so horrifying that it cannot be watched; they are meant to allow us to imagine something (something unseen) based on this complex and perverse desire to see, perhaps with our ears, that which we do not want, or are not meant, to see.

Film sounds also tend to depict what we might have never seen or heard before, such as the running over of a boy by a war tank in *The Skin* by Liliana Cavani. Because we do not know what that sounds like, cinema plays with what we imagine the sound would be. In the case of the aforementioned boy, people “may imagine that it has some of this humid, viscous quality”(Chion 1994:22). The sound of the boy being squished, as it imagines a specific body formation, transforms the viewer’s rendering of ‘a’ boy, since it tries to convey what that image – and a generic boy - is “made of”. Likewise, in Franju’s *Eyes without a Face*, Chion illustrates how the body of a woman being dropped into a family vault is made to sound like a “flat thud”, “transform[ing] the human being into a thing, into a vile, inert, disposable matter, with its entrails and osseous cavities”(Chion 1994:23).

However, as Chion explains, these transformations of humans into sounds, or of an image through/with sound, are only “recognized as truthful, effective and fitting if they render the feelings associated with the situation” (Chion 1994:109). The transforming sound, thus, needs to connect itself with some sense of “reality”, be that of experience or of that reality we inhabit in dreams – the reality of fantasy. Put differently, these sounds which are meant to render real what is most likely not real (the sound of a boy being squished) functions as something akin to, or actually “real”, because they give us something with which we can fantasize. If that is the case, when the woman in Franju’s film becomes, through sound, a vile, inert, disposable being, is it not being turned into something that is at least reminiscent of how a slave was legally defined in the Antebellum period(Hartman 1997)? And if so, can we not say that the sound of human suffering and death continues to be associated with our fantasies of and about slavery?

In the movie *Sud*, by Chantal Akerman, the “afterlives of slavery”(Hartman 1997) are depicted through quietness. The director uses long, extensive shots, to illustrate a stillness in the city of Jasper, Texas, where James Byrd Jr, a black man aged 49, was dragged behind a pick-up truck for 1.5 miles before dying. The long quietness that accompanies the movie makes one wonder, and imagine, the peacefulness and normality of life that underpins the violent lynching. It also makes us – forces us – to imagine James Byrd’s encounter with death, as she films the back of a truck while it drives for 1.5 miles. The sound of silence, interrupted by wailings, prayers and testimonials allows us to wonder about the quiet of the night, when the sun sets and the residents of the city of Jasper get ready to sleep. Their dreams, based on memories from the past, a past shaped by a lynching, inhabits the quietness and stillness of that small town. And yet, the dream might instantiate other scenes of torture, of mental, but also physical torture (Beradt 2017:30)

For Dolar, the archetypical primal fantasy – that which structures, colonizes and, in his words, “takes the signifier hostage”(Dolar 2006:138) – can be understood through the example of the child’s encounter with the sounds of his/her parents having sex. In listening to the unknown sounds, the child confronts at once their own and the desire of the Other. Without knowing or understanding anything about either one, the reverberations of sound serve to propel the child’s imagination through the displeasure caused both by the unknown and by the unrealized desire. Perhaps with Kant we could understand this moment as he understands the sublime. For him the sublime is a movement of the mind wherein the formless gives rise to novel forms, expanding thus the imagination: “the feeling of the sublime brings with it as its characteristic mark a movement of the mind connected with the judging of the object (...) this movement is related through the imagination either to the faculty of cognition or to the faculty of desire”(Kant 2000:131). The feeling of the sublime, therefore, is one of displeasure, which, like Dolar’s explanation of fantasy derives from a lack, or, in Kant’s words: “from the inadequacy of the imagination”(Kant 2000:141).

If we take Dolar’s and Kant’s definition seriously, perhaps we could say that the sublime – and by extension the primal fantasy – stupefies. And if so, we can follow Fanon who proposes that racial fantasy freezes, fixes, petrifies and silences. As proposed earlier, the specifics of racial fantasy in America is connected to phobia, which “is a neurosis characterized by the anxious fear of an object”(Fanon 2008:132). The object must, therefore, by definition, “arouse fear and revulsion”(Fanon 2008:133). The fear of phobia in general is

connected to a repressed desire, and in the case of racial phobia this is even more so, since, as the fantasy goes, “the Negro has a hallucinating sexual power”(Fanon 2008:136). The images of lynchings, then, are connected to the dreams and hallucinations that “bestow on the black man powers that others such as husbands or occasional lovers did not possess” and further entice the “surviving element of infantile structure” Dolar spoke of: “God only knows how they must make love! It must be terrifying.”(Fanon 2008:136). This is why, as Marriot explains, many of the lynchings involved castration. The primal scene of American culture is an elaboration on/about the unknown, feared and desirable desire of the Other. The absolute Other, the one which undoes me, and therefore needs to be stabilized, fixed, silenced.

2. Fantasies of/in photographs

Tina Campt’s *Listening to Images*(2017) attempts to counter the resounding and vociferous silence imposed by racist imaginaries with a different mode of listening. Analyzing photographs – especially identification photos – of black men and women in the United States, South Africa and England, she adjudicates an attunement to the lower frequencies of these images. These frequencies, she states, cannot be heard by the ear, but can be listened to by the body - through its disposition to encounter and receive reverberations emanating from the frame. As she explicates, the typical mode of engaging with visual representations tends to obstruct or clog other sensorial registers and in order to counter this intuitive manner of seeing, inspecting and reading, she suggests “listening to images”(Campt 2017:41).

Photographs tend to speak as - and to - the imagerics of desire. A desire that could be traced to modern science and its “master(ing)” project. As Don Ihde explains, modern science is premised on a “preference for visualism”, which invests the gaze with the pleasures of truth(Ihde 2010:37). The visualistic nature of science fed and was fed by the technological apparatuses – such as the telescope and the photographic camera – which not only shifted modern attention to the visual but also reduced it to a “certain kind of vision”(Ihde 2010:41). As Ihde explains, unlike the telescope, which allows people to see farther, and microscopes, which allowed people to see “deeper”, photography tends to “automatically reduce the object [photographed] to an isomorphic and realistic fixed image”(Ihde 2010:43). This technology, therefore, served to “standardize perceptual results in imaging processes” and to “reveal even more microfeatures of dynamic phenomena” (Id, *ibidem*). The “accumulated success of

photographing imaging” meant that “by the 1890’s photographs had become the standard recorders of objective scientific truth” (Id, *Ibidem*).

As Denise Ferreira da Silva explicates, modern science functioned under the auspices of universal reason, for whom it was important to promote ideas of transparency, a very visualistic concept. With transparency, however, came the idea of “interiority”(Silva 2007:41). “Interiorization” was another name for the introjection of “logos” as “mind’s self-determination” in opposition to the body qua externality. The body served as a stand-in for “nature”, that is, something to be used and exploited, and wherein the notion of race was inscribed by and as science. As argued by Ribeiro et al. (Ribeiro, Vianna, and Repoles 2021), “modern/colonial reality is (...) produced by racial schemas of intelligibility” that are, in turn, “populated by phantasms”(Ribeiro, Vianna, and Repoles 2021:515). Taliria Petrone, a black feminist who is currently an elected representative for the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, proposes that this visualistic, colonial project produces black people as “objects”(Petrone 2018:367), reaffirming the notion that through knowledge production “the racial (...) operates as a productive strategy of power”(Silva 2007:165).

If we take Ihde cum Silva’s findings seriously, the story of photography is in line with – and even nourishes - racialized fantasies driven by a desire to depict and produce race as something to be understood through the visual. More: a desire to elaborate the mode of seeing race as/through the body, instantiating the connection between blackness and sexuality Fanon spoke of: “since virility is taken to be the absolute ideal, doesn’t he have a feeling of inadequacy in relation to the black man, who is viewed as a penis symbol? Isn’t lynching the black man a sexual revenge?”(Fanon 2008:137). As Ihde proposes, technologies such as photography both transform perceptions and allow worlds to emerge – in this case a world whose “perceptual reasoning” (Ihde 1996:53) is adumbrated by racial fantasies.

This, I believe, is the reason for Camppt’s insistence on listening to images. It attempts to counter the petrifying gaze by “attending to the musical patterns, rhythms, and registers enacted” by images (Camppt 2017:23). Instead of presupposing silence of images, therefore, one should listen to the “quiet humming” which not only announces lines of flight from the pictorial framing, but also allows for the “creation of new possibilities for living lives that refuse (...) regulatory regime[s]”(Camppt 2017:32–33). In analyzing photos of black “subjects” in different circumstances, she attempts to hear “the possibility of new forms of

black futurity” through the hum emanating from the picture’s sitters (Campt 2017:43). To listen to these images, she proposes “is to be attuned to unsayable truths”(Campt 2017).

But what would these unsayable truths be for Campt? What does this alternative mode of listening want to hear? And, more importantly, what does it not? If we follow her closely, it seems clear that she is attending to a hum, the “hum of these images”, which, for her, “is a quotidian practice of refusal that exceeds the sayability of words”(Campt 2017:43). The “hum”, then, stands for the incommensurable sounds that are transmitted with, through, and at times without, language. It is the excess, or the lack, that allows for meanings to emerge in spite of what is meant by the one emitting, or trying to emit, some kind of message. It is what emerges in convict photos in spite of the desire to capture and naturalize the convict image; what irrupts beyond the regulatory nature of a document; or what speaks in the gaps of traditional poses. The hum, therefore, points us to different temporalities and paths that can “appear” if we listen to the “fissures, gaps, and contradictions that emerge.” (Campt 2017:94). In resisting the truth meant to be told, we “unpack the logic of capture” and “make audible the quotidian practices of fugitivity they also capture”(Campt 2017:96). What she wants to see and listen to, it would seem, is the fugitive aspirations that “resist the silencing effects” of the state’s – and we could say the white gaze’s – grammar(Campt 2017:90).

With this, we could argue that what she does not want to see or listen to, are the very markings which arrest, objectify and capture black fugitivity and futurity. When analyzing the photos of incarcerated black men she states that “it felt wrong to have access to intimate details of bodily markings, illnesses, whippings, closest relatives, attempted and successful escapes.”(Campt 2017:90). However, if we follow Marriott and Dolar, for whom the traumatic kernel of experience, or the undesirable as such, constitutes fantasy precisely because what is experienced is always already unseen and unheard – or, to follow Freud at least, disavowed – we have to look elsewhere for what Campt does not wish to and actually refuses to see.

Campt affirms that her attempt at an-other listening is connected to undesired stories, images and sounds that have populated her imagination. Following that logic, she explains that her interest in identification photos is connected in her memory to an event from her childhood in the DC suburb of Prince George’s county (Campt 2017:103). There, in the summer of 1978, a brown-skinned boy named Terrance Johnson, was arrested with his brother for a petty crime and tortured by policemen at the police station. At a given point,

“fearing for his life after an officer reportedly placed him in a choke hold and slammed his head against a wall, he grabbed the policeman’s gun from his holster and shot and killed him and another officer”(Campt 2017:103)

The child was sentenced to 25 years in prison and the image of his predicament stayed with her. But this image was not a photo she had seen. Instead, it was a fictional mug shot she fantasized about. An emotional and affective mug shot, that Campt elaborated as a long-term memory. The actual mug shot was never divulged, and yet, she imagined it: “the mug shot I remembered so vividly was a creation of my emotional and affective attachment to a boy whose short life shaped much of my early political consciousness.”(Campt 2017:104). The actual photo, the one that “undid” her as a 14 year old seems to have been repressed, and, for that reason, it is perhaps here that we find that which she does not want to see or hear. The photo of Johnson was printed on a newspaper: it was “a black and white newspaper photo of a tearful and desperate fifteen year old in handcuffs and a jumpsuit in the backseat of a police car on his way to jail” sounded like the words she used to describe the situation, allowing her to repress the image but still hear and speak the words(Campt 2017:104).

The actual picture of Terrance, crying in the back of a police car, a symbol of the torture he underwent and of the path designed for him by the law, is perhaps too reminiscent for Campt of what Ngai calls the “racialized affect of animatedness”(Ngai 2005:9). That is, the exaggerated expressiveness, the constant agitation, which tend to signal the stereotypical form of the “racialized subject’s naturalness and authenticity”(Ngai 2005:95). Johnson, while being disciplined by the state and appearing in the very scene of his subjection, enacts not only his social role, but his stereotype. He has “become a spectacle”, he has been “subject to manipulation”, or, in other words, is a “human body [that] subjected to manipulation [has] become a spectacle”(Ngai 2005:99). In that case – and here perhaps I diverge from Ngai – we could perhaps understand Campt’s repression and consequent fantasy as a desire to unsee, or unhear, what is for her a very Real mode of mimetic realism(Ngai 2005:105). Ngai states that the “demand for mimetic realism in representation of blacks on television” stems from the idea that what appears in/through Mass Media is always the stereotypical definition of blackness(Ngai 2005:104). What is lacking – those in this camp argue – is more attention to the singular and “real” stories of black people. What I am proposing, however, is that in spite of the singular stories and specificity of black men and women, there is another reality that is expressed in Terrance Johnson’s photo: the reality of anxiety, phobia and hatred, of “a

memory, an imago, that will not go away”(Marriott 2000:14). Or, in other words, the image is undesirable for Campit because it captures the Real as that encounter that is always-already too late, as the disturbance that reminds her of the traumas that have not all been experienced by her, but that nonetheless have been passed on to, through and with her. It is the trauma of the perpetuation and enforcement of a “concerted effort of not seeing”(Marriott 2000:21)

The trauma echoes in the tragic death of Terrance Johnson, who had his future taken away by a mis-identification which framed and marked his future through racial-criminal categorization. When Johnson left prison, having completed his GED and been accepted into Howard University Law school, his reality followed the traced and imagined path of that phobic object Marriott spoke of: “those projections frame a stark, enduring legacy of how black men have been held up to the lens of American culture. That legacy, the entire point of which is to see images of black men dead but exposed, can be read alongside what Baldwin suggests, in ‘The White Man’s Guilt’, is the strange predicament afflicting mainly white Americans; namely, they do not see what they see”(Marriott 2000:20). After encountering serious financial troubles that left him dispossessed, Terrance Johnson robbed a bank with his brother and: “when told to surrender and lie on the ground, his brother obeyed. Johnson responded by taking a step toward the officers and shooting himself in the head.”(Campit 2017:114). Perhaps the undesired images and sounds of “life in prison” were too much for him bear. Perhaps he did not want to imagine them any longer, so he crossed a line, a limit, to an elsewhere.

3. Dissociation and the unruly

Listening to sounds and seeing images that are unseen and unheard can be understood as typical descriptions of those who are mad, or insane. It is reminiscent of Winnicott’s depiction of a dissociative state:

“The patient may sit in her room and while doing nothing at all except breathe she has, in her fantasy, painted a picture, or she has done an interesting piece of work in her job, or she has been for a country walk; but from the observer’s point of view nothing whatever has happened. In fact, nothing is likely to happen because of the fact that in the dissociative state so much is happening” (Winnicott 2005:37)

With this quote, Winnicott is opposing the kind of productive, elaborative, imagination that belongs to a projective or reflexive exploration of the world to that which he

understands as the “dissociative state” of fantasizing. In fantasizing, he argues, the patient loses track of reality and their actions become inaccessible to those around them— what the patient sees, feels, speaks, does in fantasy is dissociated from reality: it is an other world. To be fair, although Winnicott is using this explanation as a way to delimit the difference between those who are sick in relation to those who are “healthy”, his stance on this dividing line, this border between madness and reality, is much more nuanced. I use this example because of the way it is constructed insofar as it points to the fact that from the outside, from the observer’s point of view, he says, nothing seems to be happening. And yet, he himself recognizes that so much actually is.

In David Marriot’s reading, dissociation is also the state Fanon ascribes to the colonized: “the colonized are the sign of a dissociation, but they cannot be simply freed from this dissociation by recourse to a more authentic self, for the colonized is this state, its own artifact; it has no other contents to discover itself anew.”(Marriott 2018:249). This is why, Marriot argues, invention, or we could perhaps say imagination, demands a “detox” or “exorcism” from “the experience of a disjuncture that is both necessary and impossible, and is not therefore willed.”(Id, *ibidem*).

If, that is the case, and if, as Fanon proposes, the colonized are explicitly inhabiting the space of dissociation, where so much happens and, yet, from the point of view of the observer (colonizer and colonized) nothing can be seen, what does it take to see, to hear, or study that which is absent?(Moten and Harney 2013)? Likewise, if, as W.E.B. Dubois points out, people within dissociative states might scream, gesticulate and move about hysterically to the amusement of those who cannot hear, see or understand what is going on(Du Bois 2014:66), how can this unruliness be written, expressed and imagined in spite of the constraints that have generated the spaces as such?

What if imagination is that which interacts with and takes seriously the possibility (or perhaps the necessity) to inhabit dissociative states? From this perspective, the other-worldly, the otherwise and that which seems “fantastic”, because “dissociated from reality”, cannot be imagined as a world that “could be”, but, instead, must be experienced as one that is (or perhaps in Marriot’s sense, one that *n’est pas* (2018:223). Even if, or perhaps precisely because it is, dissociated from what we perceive to be real. As Moten proposes, thinking, or study, must inhabit, or travel within and through imagination as that which augments,

supplements or even instantiates the real, as a “deviance both from and within the grammar and diction of the administered world”(Moten 2018:252)

Moten seems to present us with an example of what type of madness, or dissociative state, can be understood, concretely, as the space of absence (of the unseen and unheard). Drawing on Sora Han’s essay, “Slavery as Contract: Betty’s Case and the Question of Freedom”, he posits a type of madness. A madness that is perhaps the only real sanity in a world where freedom and slavery presuppose one another. In that world, Betty, an enslaved woman, “chooses” to return with her masters to Tennessee, instead of “freely” staying “free” in Massachusetts. Her refusal is taken by Han to be “a performative against all performances of freedom and unfreedom dependent on the historical dilemma of a lack of meaningful distinction between freedom and slavery performances.”(Moten 2018:247).

The story goes that in 1857 an enslaved woman named Betty was declared free by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts. After having been recognized as a subject of rights who possesses, therefore, free will, the court ruled that she could not be bound to others as property. She had been understood as a contractual agent, a legal person, who could be freely exploited as a laborer but not as a slave. In spite of this, Betty decided to go back to Tennessee, where she was a slave, with the people who had been her owners. This decision, Betty’s “scandalous decision to return to slavery” (Sora Han in: Moten 2018:246) could be understood as, or through the lens of, madness, dissociation. In fact, the Judge’s initial reaction, upon hearing Betty’s “voice” was to interrogate her sanity: how could one choose, if one has the liberty to live otherwise, to be a slave? What fantasy, what insane fear or ignorance, could be so fundamentally inscribed in a rational person’s mind that would lead them to this decision?

In actuality, her “madness”, her real and deranged deviation, is not visible to or heard by the Judge. As the latter states, his interview with Betty “proved” she was sane, capable, and imbued with all the faculties that allow for free will. Her derangement, then, that which dissociates her from what he considers the real, escapes him. Even the dissociative state, therefore, is unseen here because of what we could understand, following Althusser, as the ideological process of naturalization(Althusser 2014:199). For the judge, Betty is read, seen, understood and heard as a willfull individual: a choosing, self-possessed being who, nonetheless, freely chooses non-freedom. Again, although it is as if “from the observer’s point of view, nothing whatever has happened”, the judge, unlike Winnicott is unable to even

realize the dissociation from what he conceives as reality. The former has accepted “what is in front of him” much more readily.

As an observer who “saw enough in Betty’s performance, and had faith in his own power to explain” all the judge sees and hears is the normatively designed ordering and classifications that delineate the figure of the One(Moten 2018:250). The individual, as the one who is capable of being sovereign through self-mastery and self-control, enters the scene as that which is both presupposed and instantiated by the invocation of contracts as regulators of social relation(Moten 2018:255). As Moten proposes, what Betty actually rejects and what is critically unfathomable for the regulated and regulative social life as encountered by Betty’s facticity, is individualization.

Betty rejects life as solo performance, in Moten’s understanding(Moten 2018:253). And, in so doing, she puts in crisis the very understanding of freedom as something that is abstract, transcendent, and personal through impersonalization. What she rejects, in the end, is “nothing more than vernacular loneliness”(Moten 2018:251): “she refuses the individuation that is refused her and claims the monstrosity of obscene social life that is imposed upon/ascribed to her”(Moten 2018:252). She refuses, in other words, the “treatment” given by the state, a treatment of her state, of her living, in favor of, or in the knowledge of, her “dissociative state”. A dissociative state that, in this instance, is understood through Betty’s “free choice of unfreedom”, but in fact gestures towards a mode of entanglement and living that is difficult to fathom for those who champion abstract freedom. Perhaps because that which has been rendered as “real” is “antisocial sociality” (Moten 2018:255), making it blind to any dissociation from it: a dissociation in favor of a sociality that is very much allergic to the logic of the One.

This, I suppose, exemplifies the very nature of Moten’s call for both a refusal of that which has been refused and an embrace of that which has been imposed. The former seems easier to envision. To reject property relations, the nuclear family, commodification of life, sovereignty, subjectivity and even the nation-state as the only legitimate representative of collective power is somewhat conceivable. But what about embracing that which has been imposed? Moten says: “What if blackness is in fact abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious precisely insofar as it is the continual refusal of normative individuation, is supposed to be the enactment of everything opposite to these qualities?” (Moten 2018:266). This gesture, which in the end is a radical questioning of

discourses of self-improvement, is also a reclaiming of the “grotesque and ugly as a powerful aesthetic of exaggeration, crudeness”(Ngai 2005:105) Are not these kinds of thoughts the ones Kant once wanted to reject as non-sensical and irrational? Are they not undesired, rejected, corrupted?

Conclusion

In the foreword of “On Black Men”, David Marriott proposes that “daring to dream” is a significant, yet strange, watchword for his book. As he proposes, “daring to dream is (...) a double commitment to pursue the wished-for risk and revolutionary hope that by dreaming the un-thinkable – namely, wanting, rather than hating, one another – we can contest the dreamwork of racist culture in its verisimilitude, address and imagine another kind of experience, another kind of living present and future.”(Marriott 2000:vii). In other words, his book engages with the fact that Black Men’s dreams have been occupied by racial fantasy and phobic objects. This, of course, is Fanon’s elaboration. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon proposes that dreams, hallucinations and delusions are different for black people precisely because blackness, or being black, is an undesired image even for themselves. So what does it mean to encounter an undesirable image or sound in fantasy or dreams that remind the subject of its undesirability as well as of what it can never be? In fact, with Fanon, the black subject is reminded that it cannot be as such.

In Fanon’s reading of Lacan’s mirror stage, race interrupts the process of image-making that structures one’s sense of reality by disabling the desirable mimesis which typically sees in the other that which can be desirable in oneself: “it is in reference to the essence of the white man that every Antillean is destined to be perceived by his fellows(Fanon 2008:141). The dream of black subjects, therefore, are occupied, or colonized, by a lasting, and structuring undesirable image: that of the black man/woman. In *Whither Fanon*(2018), Marriott engages this problem through a quote of Fanon’s that sees black life caught “in the noose of existence”. For Marriott, this noose could be understood as “the figure for what surround black internal life”. Caught in a space of racial hatred, painted by the images and memories of lynchings – “blackness never stops being lynched in its image, or lynched as image” - Marriott argues that the black subject, and blackness as such “is itself always freely disavowed as the price of [freedom’s] entry into the world”(Marriott 2018:213). Or, put

differently, the black subject, or the black man for Marriott, is the fundamental expression of what should not be, cannot be, desired. Of that which cannot be.

If we follow Marriott and Fanon, here, the undesired images of race are actually fundamentally desired, because absolutely constitutive of race as such. The will to categorize, then, is driven by a will to destruction that has been attached to blackness as the death which makes living possible. To dare to dream, then, would be to face and engage that death-image in a “vertiginous movement (...) toward the void”(Marriott 2018:213). This void, for Marriott, is the hole of the noose, both a foreseen and repeated destruction; as well as an opening to an elsewhere: to other dreams. In other words, if we follow Marriott cum Moten, the undesired and undesirable demarcate both the space/time of violence/oppression and whence one can endlessly create, interrupt, disorder and disrupt oneself. And perhaps this is why Marriott affirms that “the best way of ensuring psychic health [in a racist society] might be, as Baldwin observed, to appear to ourselves inverted, as in a camera obscura”(Marriott 2000:21).

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