

# ON MEMORY AND POST-TRUTH: THROUGH THE FAMILY ALBUM

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## ABSTRACT

Facing an idea of post-truth — “post” as meaning to be beyond something, that signifies spatial distance, to go beyond the unrepresentable — and taking family history as a starting point, this article intends to understand and pluralize the Eurocentric regime of truth over non-Western narratives during the colonial period. Through the only existing photography of my Portuguese colonial priest and great-grandfather, it is meant to rethink and reformulate the problem of the western modern thought and its application as a global model to understand memory, history and truth over the non-Western knowledge as two co-producers and complementing models of modernity.

Keywords: Colonialism; Representation; Memory; History; Regime of truth.



Portrait of Pe. Joaquim Pinto, circa 1900 © Pinto Family

“In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling.” (Sontag, 2001, p. 20)

## ON CONSTRUCTING MEMORY

Until today, my family incessantly shares photos of my great-grandfather exclaiming his beauty or the excellence of having dedicated himself to the church, absorbed in a truth that they choose not to repeat: my great-grandfather was a Portuguese priest sent on a religious mission to Cape Verde.

I never knew my great-grandfather; my mother and her brothers never knew him either. My great-grandfather, Joaquim Pinto, was in Cape Verde between 1900 and 1920, sent by Portugal and it was in Cape Verde that he met Ludovina, a local woman with whom he had four children, one of them Lino, who he never saw growing up. They didn't marry under the Catholic Church, they never followed any norm, from the deviation from the priest's role to the deviation as a Christian.

My great-grandfather returned to Portugal when the Portuguese state removed him from Ribeira Grande in Cape Verde. He fulfilled his role. My grandparents Lino and Engrácia got married at the age of 65, nine children raised. They got married late, perhaps because of grandfather Lino's rejection of his father's Catholic beliefs, who although he didn't know much about, he knew had abandoned his mother.

Cape Verde is a state of slave origin, initially populated by a white elite dedicated to the commercial trade that brought their black slaves, and

which, being the country geographically on the slave trade route, made it an important trading post for both goods (like sugar cane and cotton) and human slaves.

As is “historically” known, the European expansion process began with two main events: the Portuguese explorations of the African coast (1430–1498), and Columbus voyages to the “new world” (1492–1502). The pretext for such expansion was based on the search for wealth and new trade routes and on the mission to Christianize the “wild world”. Bringing the Faith to the subjugated Other under the pretext of enlightening and civilizing, makes the division of Africa under the purview of Western “civilized” countries feasible.

The slaves who remained in Cape Verde were forcibly converted to Christianity, the Faith was used as a way of “civilizing” the Other, disregarding other ideas and equally valid civilizational backgrounds; the names were changed to Portuguese names that were easier for the colonizers to pronounce.

This is how a nation is formed, made up of a plebs of black bodies forced into “civilized” procedures, stripped of their identities and histories, non-subjects for centuries, imposed by the white masters who ruled this country now part of the Portuguese Empire period.

## **HISTORY, INTERPRETATION, REPRESENTATION**

My great-grandfather met my great-grandmother sometime in the first decade of the 20th century, when Cape Verde belonged to Portugal, also when, for the republican colonialists, it was at the “time of affirmation of the empire, of the values of the Race (a supposed Portuguese race) (Alexandre, 1979) to impose on almost savage peoples. Cláudia Castelo states that “miscegenation was considered to have negative consequences and that mestizos were biologically inferior” (Castelo, 1998, p. 84) and that the solution laid in ethnic colonization, that is, in the “settlement of African colonies by a large white population, from both sexes, to avoid racial mixing” (Alexandre, 1979, pp. 7–8). Portugal had, at the time, the historical duty of imposing on the “inferior races” the values of Western civilization and Christianity in an immaculate way. It is difficult to say when Ludovina (she did not have a surname) and Father Joaquim Pinto met. It’s information that no one, family member or friend, can give; a subject that, when questioned, is translated into almost nothing, it’s a taboo.

Colonial space is a place of ontological shock, full of indigenous meaning that competes with a foreign semiotics that does not accommodate class and gender distinctions in the same way, and that must be rewritten in order to admit colonial appropriation.

“The archeology of the human sciences has to be established through studying the mechanisms of power which have invested human bodies, acts and forms of behavior. And this investigation enables us to rediscover one of the conditions of the emergence of

the human sciences: the great nineteenth century effort in discipline and normalization.” (Foucault, 1988, p. 61)

In this quote, Foucault refers to the constitution of a disciplinary system in post-industrial societies that allowed separating the “normal” from the “abnormal” and that defines power relations and, consequently, the history of what happens from the 19th century onwards.

The essential role of “history” in these centuries is to represent a past that induces a perception of the present in order to create what Paul Ricoeur refers to as “social frameworks of memory” (Ricoeur, 2006), in the sense of normalizing a path that leads to the success of that historical time.

History is a representation of the past which, as a representation, implies an interpretation of facts. The word “representation” is applied in the sense that Ricoeur understands in chapter 3 of the book “Memory, History, Forgetting”, i.e., as an indicator of a continuity between the explanatory problematic of writing or of the literary; representation translates into an explanatory object of formation of social bonds and identities through these connections, in the way social agents understand them through the way historians represent (through their own view and social formation) the relationship between the represented object and social action. In short, representation ceases to constitute two phases of the historiographical process, emerging as the connecting plane between history and memory (Ricoeur, 2006).

“It is in terms of representation that the phenomenology of memory, following Plato and Aristotle, described the mnemonic phenomenon in that what is remembered is given as an image of what was previously seen, heard, experienced, learned, acquired. Furthermore, it is in terms of representation that what memory intends can be formulated insofar as it is said to be about the past.” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 235)

Representation can also be understood as an interpretation of a subject. Interpretation, and consequently, representation, must be evaluated under “the historical view of human consciousness” (Sontag, 2001, p. 20), that means that any subject, before becoming an object of historical knowledge, is object of a narrative, a facilitator, a means, a representation of an event that implies a narrator. A narrator’s descriptive capacity is limited by the story’s inability to absorb the entirety of versions of an event; since the narrator is not an apolitical subject, this figure has a position fostered in a certain period of time and space, the narrator is, unapologetically, a historical and political subject.

In fact, this narrator acts under a regime of truth, in the case of the nation-state, an actor under a rhetoric that claims a statute of truth for his speech, which will negotiate the meaning of social relations and their meaning in order to ensure a national identity. The state recreates the meaning of nationality not only through authoritarianism, but through the

creation of relationships of dependence and consent between the various actors that constitute these social and political relationships. Therefore, representation contributes in part to the creation of rules that would discipline the nation's constituent bodies, positioning them in the social hierarchy, in a self-regulated system by the political axis of representation (Tagg, 1988).

As Homi Bhabha said,

“Nations like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force.” (Bhabha, 2014, p. 1)

One could argue that the success of the Eurocentric modernity could only be achieved by the exclusion of the non-West world, and that “the narrative of the emergence of modernity does not, in itself, compromise the Eurocentrism of the conventional narrative. This narrative can be modified in order to recognize a ‘co-production’ of modernity, while continuing to assign the central role to Europe.” (Seth, 2022, p. 153). This co-production of modernity in Europe means the integration of the non-West in the history of modernity — linked to the colonial expansion process — could be, as Sanjay Seth defends, an intellectual strategy to comprehend a West/ non-West model as complementary because it seeks to disassociate the modernity from Europe alleging historical and empirical questions, turning this strategy into a global one (not universal one).

It's proposed to rethink and reframe the western model of thought as a way to understand non-western possibilities of narrative, knowing that both models are intrinsically correlated and are constructed through the strict relation to the other.

In terms of representation through visual means, the ocular-centric regime put in place by the western world as a means of producing truth in a certain “regime of truth”, crystallized through photography, a series of policies of belonging and exclusion, producing parallel categories for the body, truth and knowledge, and for identity and power. This categorization generated by Western visual culture, in imperialist regimes “of reconstituting the world in circumscribed spaces for control and exhibition, functioned as a dramatic (and traumatic) extension of a process of affirmation of the sovereignty of the subject (of humanism). In this context, the creation of botanical and zoological gardens in the urban environment transferred the elements of a primitive Arcadia to the city, causing the exotic and wild to be framed today as *locus amoenus* or as havens of pleasure and fun. Integrating new representations in which exoticism was rescued to a comfortable domesticity (to the viewer).” (Azevedo, 2008, p. 15)

According to Foucault, the regime that a society establishes as a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1988) formulates a type of discourse that harbors mechanisms based on a certain “truth”, mechanisms that allow us to distinguish true and false within a “social framework”, a status of obtaining “truth” from those in power to dictate what is “true”. A regime of truth, a discourse in favor of a strategy of power. A narrative that becomes history, a memory that becomes historicized.

We can introduce Pierre Nora’s concept of “memory-nation” (Nora, 1984), about the need to create symbols to consolidate an idea of history, an idea of a dead memory that is still present, signs on the statutory form, on a hymn, or in the form of a national holiday and exaltation of remote deeds as constitutive of national identity. Indeed, we can infer that the state’s ability to define and carry out its “projects”, as well as its ability to authorize official narratives of historical memory, depend on the state’s claim to power, i.e., power defines the terms of its representation and the ability to exercise it over those whose authority is claimed under those terms.

To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur (2006), it is through the nation as a regulatory entity that memory-history acquires the same space of meaning as memory. Ricoeur, also mentions “memory grasped by history”, a memory grounded in history, through the archive and writing, the moment in which *hypomnesis* (remembrance, written memory, dead, belonging to the past) replaces *mnemé* (living memory).

The rising nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries place modern States involved in the reproduction of a national identity, in a homogenization of the population and in the clear identification of what the idea of nation is and of a representation and stratification of societies by national subjects based on an idea of *jus sanguinis* as opposed to the other members of the nation, the inferior Other.

The discontinuity of the nation created by imperialism and by the rupture between history and memory, creating a closed history of the nation and historicized memory produced by institutionalized mechanisms, although it allows to make visible the mechanisms that involve the history imposed until then, it also promotes an opportunity to rewrite the conscience of the nation.

This discontinuity is louder when oral testimony is silenced, and memory and history break down, not because of the loss of meaning of the *mnemé*, but by the imposition of *hypomnesis* imposed on the meaning of archive and rewriting of the collective narratives of the Other in its insertion into the collective memory of the Western-Self.

The voice of the subaltern in the experience of history, in the narrative outside the political narrative, is the space of silence of the main narrative. My great-grandfather is much more present on the memory of our family history, crystallized by this picture, the only one we own of him, than my great-grandmother, of whom we have no photographic record. It is her absence I specially notice while looking at this photography of Father Joaquim Pinto.

Identity is deeply rooted in process and representation. In this way, the modeling of space-time relationships in different representation systems has profound effects on the way identities are located and represented. The white male normative subject, represented in the 18th century's paintings, or in his vision in the 17th century, in which the woman and the landscape constituted elements of the same sedentarization territory in a topographical imaginary that fit the masculine sensibilities, has a different meaning. cultural identity of the subject who sees himself/herself mirrored in the fragmented and fractured "faces" that look from the planes of the broken surfaces of one of Picasso's paintings. All identities are located in a symbolic space and time, they have what Edward Said calls "imaginary geographies", their characteristic "landscapes", their sense of "place", of "home", as well as their locations in the time (Said, 2003), in invented traditions that link past and present, in origin myths that project the present in reference to the past, in narratives of nation that connect individual memory to broader national historical events.

"That space within oneself where resistance is possible remains. It is different than to talk about becoming subjects. That process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resist from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined." (Hooks, 1990, p. 15)

The desire to belong to an idea of the West, admiring what is of the West in our family, through a Manichean idea of progress, an internal narrative, not so much political but emotional, is an impediment to the construction of the "historical" narrative of the family, of mine and so many other Cape Verdean families with similar origins.

Cape Verde is a particular case on the colonial scenario, as it was something of a laboratory of miscegenation by the time Gilberto Freyre was developing the *lusotropicalist* theory that would consolidate the Portuguese narrative of a kind colonialism, the perfect African/European population. Especially after the reviewing of the Colonial Act, introduced on the legislation so to respond to the external political pressures after the end of the Second World War and consequent proclaiming of *The Right To Self-Determination Of The Colonized Territories* consecrated by the United Nations in 1945.

At least since the last quarter of the 19th century, facing external pressure and attacks, the idea of a particular adaptation of the Portuguese to the tropical climate and a special relationship with the colonized indigenous peoples permeated the national political and ideological discourse. (Alexandre, 2000, p. 393)

That ideology has had an effect on the identity, or sense of belonging, of the Cape Verdean population, that do not see themselves as Europeans or Africans. Although that is less felt between the younger population as time goes by and the colonial period gets further back in the living memory, in a path to affirm their African heritage.

In the imperial system of dominance, photographs took an important role in creating history. The process of large dissemination (in paper journals, postcards, or even familiar correspondence...) provided an environment of repeated viewing, crystallizing concepts such as social hierarchies, foreign and domestic citizens, and other tropes, as Barthes noted “The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes, 2018, p.12).

The status of truth that photographs in the imperial apparatus claimed, is something that is a problem of “realism”. A photograph is a result of a context — historical, political and social — and of a regime of truth which Foucault argues as a political, economic and institutional analysis of the social production of such truth. As John Tagg mentions “realism” is not a universal and a-historical conception, nor a pre-given recipe for practice (Tagg, 1988).

Realism presumes an idea on endurance through time of a certain “truth”, when any “truth” is historically and ideologically definable. We must actually question that any representation of a subject can endure in any sense, for every product is defined within a social, political, ideological context.

We may imply that it is in the in between ontological spaces of signification, that a narrative can be built, between the marginal spaces of history and the central construct of the written/ official history of the nations, in a cultural and political authority negotiation.

It’s time to reject the imperialism’s conceptual apparatus altogether and give room to the silence in the archive to take part of history as Ariella Azoulay defends (Azoulay, 2019). Maybe not reject, but to confront the history making tools with a Janus type method, investigating the nation’s history in the process of the articulation of elements: “where meanings may be partial because they are in media res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image.” (Bhabha, 2018, p. 3)

Writing and consequently the archive, libraries, dictionaries, etc., are symbolic objects of memory made available as instruments of the historical process. Pierre Nora argues in “Lieux de mémoire” that these places of memory (which include holidays, monuments, commemorations, museums...), due to the patrimonial metamorphosis of a national identity, do not exist in the service of memory, but in the service of history (Nora, 1984).

We can make a parallel with the idea of *pharmakon*, in Plato, between the place of memory and the place of writing. Derrida mentions “(...) the *pharmakon*, or if you will, writing, can only go around in circles: writing is only apparently good for memory, seemingly able to help it from



1. About Derrida and the "Plato's Pharmacy", it is important to mention his skepticism towards the concept of *pharmakon*. "This association between writing and the *pharmakon* still seems external; it could be judged artificial and purely coincidental. But the intention and intonation are recognizably the same: one and the same suspicion envelops in a single embrace the book and the drug, writing and whatever works in an occult, ambiguous manner open to empiricism and chance, governed by the ways of magic and not the laws of necessity. Books, the dead and rigid knowledge shut up in *biblia*, piles of histories, nomenclatures, recipes and formulas learned by heart, all this is foreign to living knowledge and dialectics as the *pharmakon* is to medical science." (Derrida, 1983, pp. 72–73) This not being a philosophical paper, it isn't meant to expand the theme exhaustively for the sake of the argument, although it is important to mention that Derrida's position towards the concept of *pharmakon* is more extensive and complex than what is argued in this excerpt.

within, through its own motion, to know what is true. But in truth, writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances. The *pharmakon* produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth, etc." (Derrida, 1983, p. 99)<sup>1</sup>

Plato's philosophy is partly reflected in this duality, in the division of reality into the sphere of appearances and phenomenon and the sphere of truth, namely in the allegory of the cave in "The Republic", in which in a cave there are people chained to walls without being able to see the light of day, only being able to see shadows of what happens outside reflected on the walls of the cave. Following this metaphor, Plato in "Phaedrus" claims that writing is included in the sphere of appearance, of a belief or false reality, a non-truth, the illusion of knowledge (Platão, 2019). Writing is external to (internal) memory.

"I can tell you what our forefathers have said about it, but the truth of it is only known by tradition. However, if we could discover that truth for ourselves, should we still be concerned with the fancies of mankind?" (Platão, 2019, p. 119)

Of Phaedrus' dialogue in the story about King Thamus and the God Theuth, Derrida writes: "Confident of the permanence and independence of its types (*tupoî*), memory will fall asleep, will not keep itself up, will no longer keep to keeping itself alert, present, as close as possible to the truth of what it is. Letting itself get stoned (*médusée*) by its own signs..." much like writing is a representation of the oral speech, "its own guardians, by the types committed to the keeping and surveillance of knowledge...", such as institutions and other places of memory "it will sink down into *léthé*, overcome by non-knowledge and forgetfulness. Memory and truth cannot be separated". (Derrida, 1983, p. 99)

The relationship between writing and oral speech is a mechanism developed by the Western tradition. National identity is corroborated by writing, by an official language, by the supremacy of the document and the ability to write that confirm the superior civilization of the West, by the signed document that validates the distribution of African territory by the Western powers.

The concept of the West and its identity, although formed by internal processes that shape this set of European countries as a distinct group (during the European imperial period), is reinforced by the opposition to the non-West (Hall, 2018). It is represented and created by its opposite and by its sense of difference from other cultures, as the word West acquires meaning and is represented in relation to the Other. Binary constructions become fundamental in linguistic systems for the production of meaning, in written discourse and in western oral discourse.

Extending the argument over the construction of meaning and the written word, Saussure, establishes that for the construction of a term's meaning, it is required to form a relationship with other existing terms in a linguistic system (Saussure, 1966). In this way, the construction of meaning depends on the difference of two opposing terms that, being

different, are co-dependent in the creation of their individual meanings, for example, “the night” does not exist without its opposite “the day”.

“At a certain moment, the fates of what had been for many centuries separate and distinct worlds became – some would say, fatally-harnessed together in the same historical time frame. They became related elements in the same discourse, or way of speaking. They became different parts of one global social, economic, and cultural system, one interdependent world, one language.” (Hall, 2018, p. 145)

The truth constructed over the photography of Joaquim Pinto, about his western beauty, is constructed in opposition to the African great-grandmother, daughter of a *badia* – which is the term used for slaves who fled their master’s to Santo Antão or to the mountains of Santiago Island. The dichotomic language, or the prevalence of one figure over the absence of the other, might be read as a produce of the colonial project, of a colonial system of representation through the absence of the subaltern voices.

The process of colonialism is a project of establishing the creation of discursive strategies in order to legitimize the dominion of one over the Other, through the construction of representations of the Other through the use of stereotypes that operate mainly on the combination of adjectives that establish certain characteristics. like truths. Stuart Hall refers to Hulme with regard to the idea of the Other’s discourse namely on “stereotypical dualism”:

“1. First, several characteristics are collapsed into one simplified figure which stands for or represents the essence of the people; this is stereotyping.

2. Second, the stereotype is split into two halves – its “good” and “bad” sides; this is “splitting” or ‘dualism’.

Far from the discourse of The West and the Rest being unified and monolithic, ‘splitting’ is a regular feature of it. The world is first divided, symbolically, into good/bad, us/them, attractive/disgusting, civilize/uncivilized, The West/ and the Rest. (...) By this strategy, the Rest becomes defined as everything that the West is not – its mirror image.” (Hall, 2018, p. 171)

Colonialism is, in addition to the occupation and territory of others, the creation of a policy of difference between colonists/indigenous, human/subhuman, it is a project of Western supremacy, it is a project of economic, political and geographical domination. It is mastery over history in Western narrative.

If one of my great-grandfathers (from my maternal grandfather’s lineage) was a Portuguese priest and it is possible to trace his family back to the 18th century, the other great-grandfather (from my maternal grandmother’s lineage) is, on file, non-existent. We only know who

the great-grandmother was and from there only one more generation is known, a woman Maria Ana da Graça (Maria Ana da Graça had no surname), towards the past there were no registered names, only property titles.

The way I found to understand Ludovina (my great-grandmother) and to get closer to her is by understanding her absence through the presence of Father Joaquim Pinto (my great-grandfather) and the only photography that renders him “real”.

“The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.” (Sontag, 2001, p. 21)

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