

## Under Erasure: Kader Attia's *Museum of Emotion* Hayward Gallery, London, 2019

The *Museum of Emotion*, exhibited at the Hayward Gallery, London, February – May 2019, was formulated as the “first UK survey” of French-Algerian artist Kader Attia’s (b.1970) work.<sup>1</sup> The show charted Attia’s interdisciplinary practice from the past two decades, which has dealt broadly with transnational histories of colonialism, violence, oppression and dispossession. In Attia’s works, as the *Museum of Emotion* demonstrated, these histories are not confined to the past. Instead, they continue to resonate through scars and wounds that, in their visibility, come to denote the simultaneous absence and presence of the violence of their origination. The scar’s paradoxical status in Attia’s work recalls Jacques Derrida’s notion of writing ‘under erasure,’ which was visualised in his writing through the chiasmic device of overlaying words with an X. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Derrida used this strategy to indicate the simultaneous necessity and inaccuracy of writing itself, and the manner in which its existence implies the absence (or deferral) of the object to which it is supposed to refer.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kader Attia: *The Museum of Emotion*

<sup>2</sup> Spivak, “Translator’s Preface” xxxii

In this review of the *Museum of Emotion*, I situate my argument within and against the Hayward Gallery’s concept of the exhibition as a ‘survey’. That is, by focussing on only one room in the show, I aim to trace a fissure (or a scar) within its totalising aims. In this sense, by resisting the temptations of the ‘overview’, this re-view is written as an attempt to inhabit the logic of Attia’s practice itself, and the manner in which the artist places the postcolonial discourse ‘under erasure’ in order to interrogate its epistemological foundations. This process is apparent in the naming of ~~La Colonie~~, a space in Paris founded by Attia, Zico Selloum and their families. ~~La Colonie~~ functions as an independent platform for performance, art, activism and critical discussions that all aim to give voice to marginalised minority groups.<sup>3</sup> As with Derrida’s writing ‘under erasure,’ the crossing out of ~~La Colonie~~ indicates that the colony is, like the scar, both ‘post’ and ‘present.’<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in using the term ‘~~colonie~~’ to refer to this grouping of academics, artists and activists, the discursive relationship between colonised and coloniser comes to exceed the logic of the latter. In other words, while the legibility of the word ‘~~colonie~~’ is an indication of its continued legacies, crossing out the term is a political gesture that refuses to reduce the activities within this space to these terms. At the same time, the presence of ~~La Colonie~~ in Paris could also be understood as a counter-colony; a ‘colonisation’ of

<sup>3</sup> Zapperi, “Kader Attia: Voices of Resistance” 121

<sup>4</sup> Spivak, “Translator’s Preface” xxxii

the centre by the periphery. However, this process does not establish another centre, but instead underlines the provisional nature of La Colomie's authority.

From this methodological basis, the second room of *The Museum of Emotion* might be similarly conceptualised as a *colonie* within the exhibition as a whole. The room contains three works. The first of these is *The Body's Legacies, Pt 2: The Postcolonial Body* (2018) comprising a documentary video running 48 minutes and a broken plastic chair stitched together with metal staples. Also displayed is a selection of re-printed archival photographs of dictators, singers and musicians in a work entitled *The Field of Emotion* (2018–19); and a selection of photographs of Algerian transgender women living in Paris from Attia's series *La Piste d'Atterrissage (The Landing Strip)* (2000–02). These works are drawn together as a coherent totality through their use of documentary media, such as photography and video, as a way to represent the 'reality' of their subject-matter. At the same time, this pretence to intelligibility is undermined by the fact that these 'representations' consistently fail in their ability to reveal a truth that might be grasped through 'actual' experience. In this way, they are constantly 'under erasure'.



Kader Attia  
*The Field of Emotion*  
2018 – 2019

Site-specific wall installation of  
31 fine art inkjet prints  
Exhibition view of Kader Attia:  
*The Museum of Emotion*,  
Hayward Gallery, London, 2019  
Courtesy of the artist and Hayward Gallery  
Photo: Thierry Bal

*The Body's Legacies, Pt 2* finds its 'origin' in an incident in February 2017, when a youth worker, Théo Luhaka, was beaten and raped by police officers who were arresting him in the Parisian suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois. This assault sparked widespread protests against racially motivated police violence. These were met with counter-reactions from the far-right National Front (FN), who framed the protests as evidence of growing civil unrest in France, and the country's need for a strong political leader to "restore order."<sup>5</sup> In Attia's video, surveillance footage of Luhaka's assault becomes the starting point for extensive interviews with four individuals—activist and writer, Olivier Marboeuf; journalist and decolonial activist, Louisa Yousfi; philosopher Norman Ajari, and theatre writer Amine Khaled— who discuss issues of racialised humiliation and

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Earle, "Lords of Disorder"



Kader Attia

*The Body's Legacies. Part 2: The Postcolonial Body* (video still)  
2018  
Single channel HD video projection, colour,  
sound, 48:00 minutes, plastic chair, wire  
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Nagel Draxler and Kunsthaus Zürich



Kader Attia

*The Body's Legacies. Part 2: The Postcolonial Body* (video still)  
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Single channel HD video projection, colour,  
sound, 48:00 minutes, plastic chair, wire  
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Nagel Draxler and Kunsthaus Zürich

violence directed towards the postcolonial body.<sup>6</sup> In these interviews, Luhaka's assault is not framed as an anomaly, but instead becomes indicative of a broader cultural and historical context characterised by the dehumanisation of racialised bodies through 'horrorism'.<sup>7</sup>

As the interview subjects in Attia's film explain, this dehumanisation is found in the requirement for the postcolonial body to be both invisible and hyper-visible. Indeed, as Olivier Marboeuf articulates in his interview, the black body is a body that is "devalued in terms of its singularity as belonging to a person, and overvalued in terms of its sexuality."<sup>8</sup> In other words, this body is hyper-visible as a potential threat, yet invisible in its individuality and humanity. In this regard, Marboeuf's statement implicitly parallels Frantz Fanon's identification in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that colonisation necessarily implies the denial of black subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> It was also Fanon who, in examining "the racial situation psychoanalytically," gave "considerable importance to sexual phenomena," positioning the fear and hatred of the black male body as yoked to the eroticisation of the "black athlete."<sup>10</sup> The violence enacted against these bodies (of which Luhaka's assault is just one example), must then be seen as a manifestation of this desire/fear, which takes place within an epistemological system that reduces the colonised body to its "biological existence" through a denial of its subjectivity.<sup>11</sup>

The framing of the colonised body in these terms has, historically, been reliant on technologies of vision. For example, in context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial ethnographic photography, instruments of measurement and visualisation were used to produce taxonomies of racialised 'types'. Here, the apparent quantification of physical differences (which were in turn believed to illuminate cultural and moral differences), relied heavily on the totalising 'objectivity' of photography as mode of documentation.<sup>12</sup> The standardisation of photographic conventions, such as the use of the Lamprey grid backdrop to facilitate anthropometric measurement, thus became evidence that in turn legitimised the racist ideologies of Social Darwinism. These photographs exemplified the mutual imbrication of anxiety and desire that surrounded, and continues to inform, the representation of the postcolonial body. On the one hand, the representation of the colonised body through the 'objective' medium

<sup>6</sup> As Attia states, "The Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, who I interviewed for my video dealing with phantom limb syndrome, says that colonisation is exploitation, is rape, is expropriation – but colonisation is also humiliation." from "Kader Attia and Ralph Rugoff in Conversation" <sup>14</sup>  
<sup>7</sup> The term 'horrorism' is a neologism drawn from Adriana Cavarero and that is used to refer to a scene that moves beyond directed violence towards total destruction. For more information, see Cavarero's *Horrorism*. The term is used by Norma Ajari in *The Body's Legacies Pt 2* and by Attia in *The Body's Legacies Pt 2: The Postcolonial Body*  
<sup>8</sup> Attia, *The Body's Legacies Pt 2: The Postcolonial Body*

<sup>9</sup> Fanon 1

<sup>10</sup> Fanon 121–23. It is important to note here the feminist criticism of Fanon's work on the basis of his erasure of black women's subjectivity in his text. For a nuanced treatment of these issues, including the potentials/ limitations of Fanon's text in the context of sexual difference see Lola Young et. al., "Dialogue" 102–113

<sup>11</sup> Fanon 127

<sup>12</sup> Brown 632

of photography demonstrates a convergence between the desire for visualisation and control. Yet this is always coupled with an anxiety that the postcolonial body, as that which is reduced to the 'biological', will exceed or undermine such systems. This is due to the fact that while the colonial photograph legitimises the violence perpetuated against colonised bodies, this horror must be 'erased' from the image itself. Therefore, as Christopher Pinney has argued, within colonial discourse, there is the ever-present fear that the 'totalising' vision of the state might be polluted by the re-emergence of that which it seeks to erase.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Pinney 33–46

One such re-emergence is found within the surveillance footage of Luhaka's assault which was publicly circulated one year after the incident. Yet, as Ana Teixeira Pinto has posited, despite the promise that this visual evidence would result in justice for Luhaka, once the video was released "the commentariat began to switch its position from mildly sympathetic to outright dismissive."<sup>14</sup> This is because the video did not stand alone but was bracketed by media commentary. As Pinto explains, "[v]iewers were repeatedly told that Théo was *costaud* (sturdy), that he resisted the officer's commands, that police officers were simply 'doing their job', and, most importantly, that the video footage did not support Théo's claim that he had been raped by the officers involved."<sup>15</sup> From Pinto's perspective, these framings were possible because of the video's failure to perform its documentary functions: the surveillance footage provided was "choppy" due to the limitations of digital cameras with low frame rates.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Louisa Yousfi, speaking in *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*, contended that the public misreading of the assault also had something to do with the fact that the video has no audio, meaning that one could "project whatever [one] wants onto it."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 33

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Pinto 33

<sup>17</sup> Attia, *The Body's Legacies Pt 2: The Postcolonial Body*

In their readings of the surveillance footage's literal and metaphorical silence, both Pinto and Yousfi place emphasis on the importance of testimony, in the form of Théo's own account of what happened to him, as well as the experiences of others who have witnessed or experienced similar assaults by the French police. The significance of these accounts (if one is open to listening to them) is that they have the potential to 'correct' the French media's falsified readings of the surveillance footage. In this manner, Pinto and Yousfi reverse the emphasis placed on images in colonial discourse and counter these representations with the 'truth of presence'. Within this conceptualisation, an image by itself can signify very little, as its meaning is dependent on one's own experience, or the testimony of those who were present. The low-quality surveillance footage with no audio thus appears analogous to Siegfried Kracauer's reading of the photograph, which in the absence of testimony becomes "the residuum that history has discharged."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Kracauer and Levin 429

Pinto and Yousfi's views regarding the paucity of the image in the absence of testimony are literalised in Attia's *The Field of Emotion*, displayed adjacent to *The Body's Legacies Pt 2* in the Hayward Gallery exhibition. This work comprises a series of black-and-white archival photographs of dictators and politicians—including Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Fidel Castro and Ayatollah Khomeini—together with musicians—such as, James Brown, Aretha Franklin and Oum Kalthoum—who are all represented in mid-speech or mid-performance. In previous editions of the work there was a clear, gendered distinction between the politicians (who were all men) and the musicians (who were all women), a divide that is not maintained in the Hayward show. Additionally, in the earlier edition, Attia contextualised some of the images by presenting them in their original form as book covers or as

illustrations for newspaper articles. However, in the Hayward show, any contextualising information about the photographs' subjects is erased. These changes to the work effectively problematise a reading that posits a contrast between the politicians and musicians, and thus a "difference between propaganda and artistic expression."<sup>19</sup> Here, the contingency of 'all' images as representations, despite their subject-matter, is brought to the fore.

<sup>19</sup> Zapperi, "The Ambivalent Power of Emotions" 60–63

As with *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*, the question of silence, or more accurately the erasure of sound, comes to indicate the image's inability to represent the 'truth' of its subject-matter. Indeed, while the majority of the photographs' subjects are pictured in the midst of an oration or performance to an audience, the photograph itself cannot contain any sound, even though the image evidences signs of its erasure. There is also another type of erasure at play here, with all of the images implying the presence of an audience to which the orations and performances are directed, while simultaneously eliminating this group from the photographic frame. The audiences' visual absence in this field of emotion means that their constitution can only be grasped as a shadow. However, we must accept the existence of this undifferentiated mass in order to recognise the famous subject as an icon. In this respect, a reading of these images is dependent on the audience's recognition of each of the photographs' subjects. However, as with the surveillance footage of Théo Luhaka's assault, this ability is necessarily dictated by one's position, experience and knowledge. Thus, in the pairing of *The Body's Legacies* and *The Field of Emotion*, one becomes not only aware of the paucity of images as deviations from (and erasures of) an 'original' reality, but also the necessarily partial nature of reading positions.

On the one hand, this recognition of the partiality of perspective undertakes an important critique of the totalising ambitious of the 'objective' vision implicit in 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropological photography, as part of the larger colonial epistemological schema. In Attia's work, this takes on added significance through the emphasis on voices that are placed under erasure within this discursive schema: that is, those who have been reduced to the 'biological'. At the same time, to comprehend the 'partial' is also to posit the possibility of 'completeness', a contention that participates in the perpetuation of the colonial by merely reversing its terms. Following this logic, to the extent that *The Field of Emotion* and *The Body's Legacies Pt 2* respond to a "demand [for] reparation," they might initially appear to offer a supplement for whatever is lacking in the image's 'partiality'.<sup>20</sup> In the case of *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*, this is the presentation of the interview subjects' testimonies that frame Luhaka's "gestures in terms of self-defence, and situate them within "a larger genealogy of violence constricting the racialised body as a body that does not belong to itself and can therefore be captured."<sup>21</sup> In *The Field of Emotion*, the repair could take the form of granting the silent photographic subjects and their absent audiences the qualities of sound and voice. In *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*, the audibility of the four speakers' testimonies seems to represent the work's successful reparation of the wounds opened by Luhaka's assault. However, in *The Field of Emotion*, redressing the "silent cry...emit[ted] between official History and the one lived endlessly in the secret of family and community stories," remains impossible.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Attia, "The Field of Emotion"

<sup>21</sup> Zapperi, "Kader Attia: Voices of Resistance" 125

<sup>22</sup> Attia, "The Field of Emotion"

Nevertheless, the difference between the 'unsatisfactory' and 'satisfactory' resolutions of these two works as "reparations" remains itself unsatisfied. This is indicated by the other component of *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*: a

broken plastic chair that has been visibly stapled back together. The 'wound' of the chair has been repaired in a manner that presumably makes it functional again, but its stapled scar remains prominent. Here, Attia's work draws an important distinction between 'reparation' and 'restoration'. 'Restoration' connotes the desire within western modernity for the possibility of absolute repair, of completely restoring what has been lost in order to erase the violence of injury or destruction, in a manner analogous to the erasure of violence in colonial photography.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, 'reparation' demonstrates the oxymoron at the heart of this process. That is, reparation has to involve an acknowledgement of the wound and the history that it represents, for "to deny it is to maintain it."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Étienne 74

<sup>24</sup> Attia, "The Field of Emotion"

This important distinction between restoration and reparation, between a denial of history and the acknowledgement of the wounds of time, also explains why Attia's installations might appear "confounding" to a viewer seeking completion or resolution.<sup>25</sup> *The Field of Emotion* thus appears unsatisfactory because it reflects the limits of such desires. Indeed, one can never retrieve the voices of those who are pictured in the photographs that make up this work. However, more significantly, one cannot comprehend those who are excluded from the image but make its framing possible: the undifferentiated mass, the audience, the massacred, the oppressed. This necessary absent presence might be conceptualised in Spivak's recognition that for the "subaltern group whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself."<sup>26</sup> A similar problematic is articulated in *The Body's Legacies Pt 2* by Olivier Marboeuf when he describes the "accomplished speaking body," who in making "demands becomes absorbed in discursive space."<sup>27</sup> In other words, for Spivak (and I would also suggest for Marboeuf), there is no possibility of retrieving the absolute, essential voice of a body which is reduced to the 'biological', without subsuming it within the representational structures that simultaneously deny and desire its in/visibility. Yet, such a recognition does not foreclose the potentialities of representation as a 'speaking for' and re-presentation as a process of imaging. According to Spivak, radical practice is developed by attending to the interrelations between these two types of 'representations' without subsuming them into one another. In other words, one must attend to how "the staging of the world in representation... dissimulates the choice of and need for 'heroes', paternal proxies, agents of power."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For example, Tabish Khan

<sup>26</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 80

<sup>27</sup> Attia, *The Body's Legacies Pt 2: The Postcolonial Body*.

<sup>28</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 74

It is this attention to the politics of 'representation', in both senses of the term, that is imbued in the relationships between Attia's works in this exhibition space. In *The Field of Emotion*, the silence of the speakers and musicians outline the chasm that exists between them and those that they represent. In *The Body's Legacies Pt 2*, the talking heads appear to represent the communities they speak for effectively, but the re-presentation (the video of Luhaka's assault) fails. Yet, in both of these works, the emphasis on either 're-presentation' or 'representation' might easily be reversed. Indeed, in *The Field of Emotion*, the absence of sound could also indicate the photographs' status as re-presentations of an always, already-lost experience. And in *The Body's Legacies*, despite the apparent neutrality of the interviews, the backgrounds behind each of the speakers might implicitly shape the manner in which we imagine the absent-present communities that they represent: wallpaper in the style of African wax prints in the case of Louisa Yousfi; Olivier Marboeuf in a scene with colours that recall the French flag; Norman Ajari in what appears to be a university building, and Amine Khaled on a rooftop, behind which is a city skyline. What is drawn into focus in both cases is

the impossibility (yet absolute necessity) of attempts to ‘represent’ and ‘re-present’ that subject/body that exists in a state of in/visibility, in the space traced by the scar.

As a way of concluding I would like to draw together these thoughts on representation through the third work in this exhibition space, *The Landing Strip*, which comprises photographs of transgender women



Kader Attia  
*La Piste d’atterrissage (The Landing Strip)*  
2000-2002/ 2019

Site-specific wall installation of fine art inkjet prints on archival paper  
Exhibition view of Kader Attia:  
*The Museum of Emotion*,  
Hayward Gallery, London, 2019  
Courtesy of the artist and Hayward Gallery  
Photo: Thierry Bal



Kader Attia  
*La Piste d’atterrissage (The Landing Strip)*  
2000-2002

Series of c-print photographs  
Courtesy of the artist

who came to Paris, largely to escape during the Algerian civil war. According to Attia, the term ‘Landing Strip’ is used by these women to refer to an area in the outskirts of Paris where they work as sex workers, along roads that look very much like airport runways.<sup>29</sup> This reference

<sup>29</sup> “Kader Attia and Ralph Rugoff in Conversation” 10

dovetails with Attia's interest in slum housing areas which are often adjacent to airports. As he explains, "...our vision of these quarters 'from above' is no doubt related to the kind of voyeurism we have when the airplane flies over poor areas during take-off or landing."<sup>30</sup> At first *The Landing Strip* appears to offer a 'remedy' to this situation, by "show[ing] the viewer something that they had no idea about."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the objectifying, totalising view from above is replaced with one of intimacy: the majority of the photographs are taken in interior spaces, depicting the transgender women applying their makeup, or in moments of celebration. Additionally, the aesthetics of the photographs recall those of family photographs: they are often over-exposed and blurred, capturing the subjects in self-conscious poses, their gaze meeting the camera, or in more informal moments of joy and spontaneity. The intimacy of these images clearly reflects Attia's close relationship with this community, particularly given the fact that they also comprise at least part of his audience.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, *The Landing Strip* does not simply replace the objective with the intimate in a manner that would merely imply shifting registers of voyeurism. As one reads the work from left to right, the installation finishes with photographs of protests organised against the French government's immigration policies, which have life and death implications for the transgender women that Attia represents and re-presents.<sup>33</sup> Here, the subjects of Attia's photographs are literally caught between, on the one hand, the potential violence that they would face in Algeria at the hands of fundamentalist Islamic factions and, on the other, in France where they are denied residency status.<sup>34</sup> As Hannah Feldman outlines, these situations are, in fact, two sides of the same coin: the French government's policy of enforced assimilation and relegation of visible religious difference to the private sphere has alienated populations living in Paris' outer suburbs, the majority of whom are of African and Maghrebian descent. It is these individuals, she explains, who become "susceptible to the separationist identities marketed to them like so many other commodities by Islamist (and other) groups seeking to augment their numbers with bodies reaped from the fertile grounds of social discontent."<sup>35</sup>

As Attia's *The Landing Strip* intimates, what is at stake here, as in all of the works in the exhibition space, is not only a recognition of the inadequacy of 'representation', but rather what Judith Butler calls the possibility of a "livable life."<sup>36</sup> That is, in placing the images in this space "under erasure," Attia performs a double gesture in recognising the limitations of representations and re-presentations of those communities still living with the legacies of colonialism, whilst maintaining the fundamentality of these for "persistence and survival."<sup>37</sup> This is an erasure that maintains its trace, simultaneously absent and present, visible and invisible. It charts the unthinkable depths of the chasm of the wound and the possibilities/necessities of living with scars.

<sup>30</sup> Durand 73

<sup>31</sup> "Kader Attia and Ralph Rugoff in Conversation" 10

<sup>32</sup> As he explains, Attia was asked by members of the community to document their parties and "fake" weddings. "Kader Attia and Ralph Rugoff in Conversation" 12

<sup>33</sup> A text outlining the plight of Algerian transgender women written by the journalist, critic and activist H el ene Hazera and illustrated with Attia's photographs from this series was published in *T etu*, a French magazine marketed to LGBTQ readers in 1999. In it, Hazera detailed how Attia had been involved with his photographic subjects' legal battles to obtain residency papers. See Feldman 64

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* 65

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Butler 1

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* 4



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