

Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self-Defense

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From Göran Hugo Olsson, the Swedish documentary filmmaker behind *The Black Power Mixtape*, comes *Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self-Defense*, a documentary made up of archives from various African decolonisation processes overlaid with excerpts from Frantz Fanon's final and seminal publication *The Wretched of the Earth*. The conclusion of the film begins with artist Lauryn Hill, the narrator of the film, reading from Fanon's work "Come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else" begging the question; who is the audience that these words are addressed to? Fanon is calling for Africans to build models for liberation that reject European and colonial frameworks for they are simply successions of negations of our humanity. When asked about the audience of the film Olsson states "...[this] film [is] for my fellow west Europeans, northern west Europeans, American[s]...It is not a film directed at oppressed peoples it is directed to the westerns" (Timoner, 2014, minute 10:13). The archival footage is of Africans, of African liberation struggles, of African celebrations and of mourning, and the text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is written by an African about African independence movements yet the intended audience of the collage of African thought and expression that is this film is not African. One can't help but feel an eerie voyeurism throughout the film not only knowing that we are not the intended audience, but also knowing and feeling who is often behind the camera.

The footage that this film was made up of is held by the Swedish Television Archives and as such Olsson has makes it clear that he feels an ownership of the footage and even goes on to say that Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* "...is our [the western white audience's] text. It is a common property" (Timoner, 2014, minute 17:31). In colonial systems of domination our bodies,

our thoughts, and our knowledge production are not ours. As such, Olsson's statements do not depart from the colonial trajectories that Africans have been resisting for centuries and that Fanon himself was calling us to reject. The only difference here is that this film, from having Lauryn Hill act as narrator to the contemporary aesthetic presentations of the footage, has managed to mask the scent of colonialism and in doing so, advance the notion that cultural production can be an apolitical site where the dynamics of white supremacy are inoculated by the good white intentions of those behind the film.

The first scene of the film, preceded by a preface read by Indian feminist Gayatri Spivak, *Decolonisation: With the MPLA in Angola 1974* begins with the voice of Gaetana Pagano, a reporter who was embedded with Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), as they entered Cabinda, a city in the north of Angola. Pagano describes how the MPLA executed a successful offensive on a Portuguese army base. Following footage of the offensive, images of African caddies carrying the bags of white people playing golf fill the screen. The point being made by juxtaposing footage of Africans fighting for freedom with the humiliation of submission is to make vivid the preposterousness of colonial living. It is at this point that Lauryn Hill reads one of the most well known lines from *The Wretched of the Earth* “[t]he last shall be first and the first last”.

These images transitions us into scene two, which is titled *Indifference: Interviews with Tonderai Makoni Ph.D, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Conducted in Stockholm 1970*. Here Tonderai Makoni recounts his experiences of being jailed for five years and provides commentary that links the struggles of African people from Zimbabwe to South Africa to Britain and the United States of America. He asserts that in all of these places, though the particulars of the subjugation may be different, the common thread that connects the reasoning for why violence can be enacted on African peoples in each circumstance is because we are always positioned as subhuman. This reasoning then justifies Africans being treated as objects for domination.

As the Makoni interview fades “The U.D.I Song” by John Edmonds, a track that celebrates the likes of Cecil Rhodes and others who were a part of occupying Zimbabwe, introduces the third scene of the film, *Rhodesia*. Following the white supremacist overtones of the Edmonds track, a white colonialist male laments the increasing power that the African independence movements are gathering. He had taken for granted that he would have at

least had time to burn everything before the Africans living in Zimbabwe took their land back. However, he admits that he has miscalculated the speed of the liberation movements and muses that he might have to leave without having time to burn everything.

Depicting the complicated processes of colonisation the fourth scene, *A World Cut in Two*, shows Africans serving white populations who are lounging poolside while Hill speaks the words of Fanon that describe the state of despair that colonisation has left the African people in while also pointing to the envy that this has created within Africans. This envy, Fanon argues, will spur the colonised to overthrow the coloniser so that they may take those positions of power back.

A Swedish-American mining company named Lamco is the focus of the fifth scene, *LAMCO, Liberia 1966*. After a strike by workers demanding better working conditions at the Lamco site in Nimba, Liberia the Liberian government, under pressure from capital interests, sends in troops to support the arrest of some of the workers and the eviction of other workers from their homes as punishment for disrupting the flow of business. As the camera spans out the viewer sees a family dropped off outside the boundaries of Lamco by Liberian soldiers in the dead of night, left to figure out what is next with the belongings they managed to pack and their young children.

That Poverty of Spirit, the sixth scene of the film, introduces Fanon's critique of religion through an interview with two Swedish missionaries posted in Tanzania. The interview is awkward because of its unintended clarity. The missionaries are asked about their role in Tanzania and it quickly becomes clear that the message they are purporting to spread, ostensibly love for all people, is simply a guise for another angle of colonisation enacted through the performance of religion for their definition of a people does not include the African person. As the sixth scene continues, Fanon's words on the erasure of African land rights, the extractive processes that support capitalist colonial practises and how these conditions sets the ground for the growth of African resistance are read by Hill. This scene is particularly poignant because the African viewers will find themselves asking if there is indeed a difference between the white missionaries and the white filmmaker through which these stories are being weaved?

The seventh scene, *The Fiat G.91: With the FRELIMO in Mozambique 1972*, shows archival footage of FRELIMO in the field and interviews with

women freedom fighters alongside the bloodied devastation on the people of Mozambique by Portuguese colonialists. This is the scene that Spivak refers to in the preface to the film when she speaks of the image of the young African woman and her baby, both of whom have been severely injured by Portuguese attacks. Spivak refers to the woman as “Black Venus” because the images of her in this scene alluded to the Black Madonna and the Venus de Milo. The preface, to divert from the seventh scene for a moment, is of significance because Spivak brings important critiques of how gender is often overlooked by writers like Fanon and also marginalised by freedom movements once power has been taken. Though she brings necessary critiques, it is curious that Spivak is giving the preface and this critique rather than an African feminist. In a film with very few visible African women speaking, the impact of a non-African woman giving the preface is heavy. Nevertheless, even if an African woman had given the preface it would not have been able to overcome the deep flaws that make this film reiterate the white male gaze and open old woundings arising from the oppressions of African women and of African peoples more broadly. The very process of the film itself re-creates this white voyeurism in a manner that no preface could mitigate.

Now, to return to the seventh scene: The seventh scene is a prime example of the predatory tones of this film. The body of the African woman, who Spivak refers to as “Black Venus”, is depicted here, in continuation of colonial traditions, to service a public spectacle of shock. She is sitting on a table missing an arm while her baby, who is missing a leg, is feeding on her exposed breasts. She is visibly uncomfortable as the camera lingers on her and her injured child. Though there is other footage in the film that also plays on the trope of shock by depicting the effects of physical violence on the bodies of African men there is an element of vulnerability and consumption that is being invoked by the footage of this African woman that we cannot ignore. Sitting at the intersection of, among others, gender, race, dis/ability, sexuality, and class, the conditions of colonialism sees to it that the African woman is open to harm from all sides – not excluding her own people. As she and her baby sit in their pain the film crew lingers in their consumption of her and without hearing her and without any sense of reciprocity we, the audience, watch. Even in the work of exposing colonialism, the visual images exploit and misrepresent African women as the quintessential, silent, victims of carnage, invoking sentiments of pity and paternalism among white viewers.

The African woman is the mule of the world, whispers the ghost of Zora Neale Hurston. What were the processes of consent for the acquiring of the footage in this film and for its ongoing dissemination? Why is it necessary to show this footage and whose desires does it appeal to?

The filmmaker argues in various interviews that the footage for the film was chosen in order to make visible the suffering that colonialism causes (Timoner, 2014). Once again, the hundreds of thousands of testimonials from Africans, unfiltered by the white gaze, over the last century are apparently not enough to have done so. A Swedish, or western, perspective must be the one framing them in order for the testimonials to be palatable; the stories of Africans must be cited, or they are not valid, Olsson reminds us. Then, as if to create a pre-emptive response to the critique of the white gaze so central to the depiction of the African woman with her baby, the scene following it, *Defeat*, shows the death of Portuguese male soldiers. Mournful music accompanies the image: we are simultaneously invited to observe that we are not *only* being shown the carnage of Africans but also of the 'other' side while being, not so subtly, nudged that we should also feel a sympathetic response to these deaths. The faux disruption of the white gaze breaks here – the farce can only go on for so long before we return to regular programming. Concluding this scene is Amílcar Cabral emphasising the importance of African cultural programs and programmatic infrastructure as a part of the independence project. Scene nine, *Raw Materials*, puts into conversation Fanon's writings on the need to reclaim our means of production with Thomas Sankara's words on resisting neo-colonial practises through ensuring that our communities are self-sustainable.

Though there are many more aspects of this film worthy of critical analysis, the critique central to this film review moves beyond this one film, as it is only symptomatic of a much larger problem. Olsson argues that this film, and his earlier production, *The Black Power Mixtape* are not about Africans but rather are about the Swedish videographers who captured this footage (Timoner, 2014). The thin veil of this argument would not withstand a light summer breeze. Olsson, by his own admission, has relationships with these videographers yet their bodies are not the spectacle that these films hinge or depend on (Timoner, 2014). It is not that the Swedish videographers are invisible or even not present in the film. On the contrary, their omnipresence behind the camera is what continues to centre the power dynamics through

which white supremacy founds itself on. Even though the intended audience of the film is not African, if we do see the film not only are we watching archives not held by those whom the footage is of, we are also only being allowed to see the portions of our stories that non-Africans deem important. Our stories are being shaped by others yet again. Our memories are being filtered through, and by Europeans who continue to demonstrate the power they exercise over the representations of our bodies, our stories, and our knowledges.

Cultural production is political, a critical component of our freedom struggles. It is through sites of cultural production and the encounters that these sites stage that we imagine and begin building our self-determined decolonial futures. If non-Africans want to fight alongside us, the archives must be returned to the communities that they depict. This call does not end, nor begin, with Swedish filmmakers in this case, or with non-African cultural producers and archivists more generally, but rests primarily with us as Africans peoples. Simply having the footage returned to us for stewardship is not the only remedy for transformation. Our own archival practises, modes of cultural production, and knowledge production, do not exist outside the problematic power relationships within our communities. Holding the flawed archives of our past is not enough to change historical narratives, as decolonising the archive requires that we establish processes of accountability and consent that we actively and continually weave into the fabrics of our struggles and visions for freedom. An important conversation needs to be re-opened about memory, culture and cultural production in the service of pan-Africanism.

All oppressed peoples must be able to maintain control over their own stories. Archiving is done to retain memory, experiences and knowledges. Archiving acts as sites for knowledge transmission within communities and sometimes for knowledge circulation between communities. In terms of radical pan-African feminist archiving we have to interrogate the practises, usages and habits of archiving as circulation and transmission. When doing archiving work with people and communities it is integral that there are clear consent and accountability processes established between those doing the archiving and those whose experiences, knowledges, art works and so forth is being archived – even if one is of and from the community. Some initial questions that those of us interested in cultural production in service of a radical pan-Africanism must consider are: What are the purposes of the archival project

and how do they serve the persons and communities involved? What are processes for dispute resolution and accountability between those archiving and the persons or communities participating in the archival project? How are decisions about where the archives will be held made? How are the frameworks for decision making around the archival project addressing the existing power dynamics within communities that privilege the voice of some at the expense of others? How will the archival processes ensure that those whose stories are being told will retain control? Any answer to these questions would need to include formulating community accountability measures in which consent is non-negotiable and an essential component to any collaborative work that is done. It would also mean a cooperative approach to resource sharing and distribution. Though these guiding questions are important they also cannot be understood in abstraction from our broader struggles for self-determination. Let's switch the script comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else.

References

- Timoner, O. (Producer). (2014, June 12). Concerning Violence – Lauryn Hill Narrated Colonialism Documentary [Episode 168]. *Bring Your Own Doc*. Podcast retrieved from <http://thelip.tv/episode/concerning-violence-lauryn-hill-narrated-colonialism-documentary/>