

## Uriel Orlow: Ghosts as companions in the abolitionist struggle

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When I was in Lisbon in early April, Uriel Orlow invited me to visit his show *Memória Colateral/Collateral Memory* at Galeria Avenida da Índia, Galerias Municipais. As I had arrived early, I lingered in the Jardim Vasco da Gama where women and men dressed in “traditional” Portuguese clothing were selling *pastel de nata*. From where I was standing, not far from the *Rosa-dos-Ventos*, a gift from Apartheid South Africa, I could see the Jerónimos monastery and the “Monument to the Discoveries”, a formidable monument of fascist design celebrating colonization, dispossession, and extraction. It stands as a daily reminder that decolonization is still ongoing, that despite the end, decades ago, of Salazar’s Estado Novo fascist regime, such a monument can still stand. A 1958 decree ordered its construction based on the model of the monument originally built for the Portuguese World Exhibition of 1940 that had been demolished in 1943. Inaugurated in August 1960 for the commemoration of the death of the Infante Henry the Navigator, it represents the prow of a caravel with, on either side, an ascending row of the agents of colonization: missionaries, explorers, scientists, cartographers and monarchs.

To reach the gallery, I walked along a mural celebrating the April 25th Revolution that in 1974 put an end to Salazar’s fascist regime, weakened by anticolonial wars of liberation in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. It was a relief to reach the Galerias Municipais, where, by escaping the commemorative tourist traps and the grandiose fantasies of fascist architecture, Uriel Orlow’s *Memória Colateral/*

*Collateral Memory* invited me to learn about marginalized and suppressed narratives and their resonance in the present. It was an antidote to the suffocating presence of the Monument of Discoveries, a powerful counter-narrative to the cruel legacies of colonialism, fascism, and racism. One could say the exhibition's power could not match the attraction of a monument in front of which tourists were taking selfies, wilfully ignoring that its narrative of glorious discoveries hides looting, destruction, massacre, genocide. But decolonial practices and gestures such as *Memória Colateral* do not seek to rival the monumental that is a signature of domination; rather, they attack the foundations of exploitation and dispossession stone by stone, pillar by pillar, image by counter-image, narrative by counter-narrative. The objective is to show the extremely diverse practices of reparation whose ethics is to carve spaces of freedom in a world still ruled by unfreedom, to reappropriate the present so that liberation always remains a possibility. And what the various pieces of *Memória Colateral* contend is that there is no justice without liberation.

The history of the oppressed, of the dispossessed, of the marginalized, often exists in fragments and bits, and must be deciphered in the scraps and shreds of official archives, in the palimpsests of indigenous writings superimposed by colonial writing. This is how Orlow works, “on the margins of history and politics, off the beaten track, in so-called blind spots, where we expect to find little of interest, because the focus lies elsewhere, but where, perhaps for that very reason, a lot of connections can be made.”<sup>1</sup> His oblique approach brings to light, often in unexpected and unforeseen ways, forgotten episodes and places. It is important to say that the colonial powers have wilfully ignored these narratives, but that they have remained, as Orlow demonstrates, embedded in memory traces. They are revived when someone is ready to hear, to listen respectfully. Orlow does not practice extraction; he creates a collaborative practice.

In *Memória Colateral*, each piece—*Unmade Film, 1942 (Poznan)*, *The Benin Project*, *Fairest Heritage*, *What Plants*

1 Orlow, U. (2023). “I am not an invisible, objective observer of the world”: Uriel Orlow in conversation with Andrea Thal and Giovanni Carmine. *Prix Meret Oppenheim*, p. 165.

2 Freud, S. (1939). *Moses and Monotheism*, The Hogarth Press, p. 94.

*Were Called Before They Had a Name*, and *Reading Wood (Backwards)*—addresses forgotten episodes and places. Each has its unique character, yet all taken together they invite the public to consider how in these very different places—Poland, Guatemala, Nigeria, Palestine, and Lisbon—stories exist out of frame, and how if we look, for instance, at the xylotheque (wood library) of the Tropical Botanical Garden, one will not only find tree samples, but all kinds of references to the extraction of wood intended for colonial administrators. This is an exercise in *unlearning to learn*. In other words, denaturalizing what has been made natural, or normalized, the world as it has always been and will always be, understanding that the world in which we live has been made by social forces which impose their order—and realizing that this order can be challenged.

Uriel Orlow's search for an inclusive reflection on reparation and responsibility, and a restitution of the natural order, offers tools for resistance by making visible patterns of structural violence that might otherwise go unperceived. This reverberates with my work on the afterlife of slavery and colonialism, of imperialism and fascism. The expression “collateral memory” brought back the notion of the “return of the repressed”, which I have investigated through my critical reading of psychoanalytical works by Frantz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, and others. Is the act of bringing to light collateral memory akin to the work on the ways in which the return of the repressed is expressed? “What is forgotten is not extinguished”, Freud wrote, “but only ‘repressed’; its memory-traces are present in all their freshness, but isolated by ‘anticathexes’... they are unconscious—inaccessible to consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

Is Orlow making the repressed accessible to consciousness, searching for memory traces that will be found in names, practices of care, and buried archives? I do think so. His work belongs to the vast movement of practices that searches through archives, documents, landscapes, plants, and memories for what has been entombed in order to

erase the traces of crimes. He deals with the presence and the return of the repressed, bringing to light the irreducible character of memory traces, whether in the tree (*Reading Wood (Backwards)*), the colonial botanic garden (*Fairest Heritage*), a synagogue that the Nazis transformed into a swimming pool (*1942, Poznan*), the indigenous names of plants that need to be returned to their rightful place (*What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name*), the much-called-for reimbursement of the Benin Bronzes looted by the British (*The Visitor*), or Deir Yassin, the erased Palestinian village (*Unmade Film*). The sheer violence of each act of erasure is made clear not by showing weapons, blood, ruins, wounds, but through the ordinary sight of a man going about his routine in a swimming pool, of glass plate negatives of the flora of Palestine, of a Lisbon wood library, of pages of plants from Guatemala in a botanical publication. It is by showing how forgetfulness operates that Orlow succeeds in bringing into the present the mechanisms of erasure through lies, diversions, and wilful erasure. He exposes how the traces of the crime are so embedded in our landscapes and narratives that only a committed act will expose the layers of erasure. Our patience and diligence are needed, because colonial erasure continues to be re-enacted long after the colonial era has come to an end, as images and words muddle the narrative. Even when the characters change, the plot remains the same: talk of the civilizing mission, scientific progress and discovery for the good of all humanity, but under pressure, new landscapes, new chapters, and even if some natives are being integrated, the framework remains the same. If liberal multiculturalism, as a tool of racial capitalism ever ready to add new commodities to the market, continues to deploy old racist tropes, it is because both have always existed side by side. There is no contradiction: power merely needs to conflate the issues of justice and liberation; power is ready to brutally crush the aspirations and desires for liberation all while commodifying them once they have been emptied of their radical demands for reparation.

3 Leitão, B. (2025). "Collateral Memory". *Galerias Municipais*. Available at: <https://galerias.municipais.pt/en/exposicoes/8734>

4 Schelling, T. (1961). "Dispersal, Deterrence, and Damage". *Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences INFORMS* 9, no. 3, pp. 363–370. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/opre.9.3.363>

## Collateral Memory, Collateral Damage

Curator Bruno Leitão has written that Orlow uses the word “collateral” to “broaden the idea of damage beyond the immediate and visible (...) in line with [his] approach to legacies of violence and insidious erasures of knowledge systems.”<sup>3</sup> As I was, however, stubbornly writing “collateral damage” rather than “collateral memory”, I wondered in which ways collateral damage in war is always immediate and visible. I looked up the origin of the expression “collateral damage” and discovered that it had first been used in 1961 by Thomas Schelling, a North American economist who influenced strategies on national security in the United States, within the context of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> To Schelling, the calculation of inevitable yet acceptable “collateral damage” from a Russian nuclear attack in the United States led him to suggest locating and storing nuclear weapons away from big cities. He was more concerned with protecting the nuclear weapons than damage to human and non-human lives. Not once did the word “human” appear in his article. His casual tone as he was writing about nuclear destruction shows the extent to which murderous violence can be translated into the bland and trite vocabulary of game theory.

People like Schelling understand how damage also has effects beyond the immediate and visible, but they don’t care—their main objective is winning. As a result, because international law now condemns civilian deaths in wars, the doctrine of collateral damage had to be rewritten. NATO’s “Doctrine of Double Effect” (DDE) offers a most certainly “regrettable but unavoidable”, justification for collateral damage: it “states, in general terms, that an act may be morally permitted, despite causing bad consequences, provided that the act itself is directed at achieving a moral good, that the actor intends solely on achieving that moral good, that the bad consequence is not a means to produce the moral good, and finally that the positive intended effects

outweigh the unintended negative ones.”<sup>5</sup> The “positive intended effects outweigh the unintended negative ones” is exactly the kind of argument that has been used to justify the US bombing of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, as well as the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Collateral damages are now budgeted by the US armies through the distribution of “condolence payments” to civilian victims.<sup>6</sup> The US army has accordingly developed the “Collateral Damage Estimation Methodology (CDEM)”, “a logical and repeatable analytical process used by military planners to assess and estimate the potential impact and consequences of an attack on a target; it aims to predict and quantify the potential collateral damage, including civilian casualties, damage to infrastructure, and other unintended effects that may result from military operations.”<sup>7</sup> Could we imagine a more effective way to insidiously legitimate pure violence?

Through his work, Orlow has perfectly captured the way brutality and cruelty are whitewashed through the use of a neutral vocabulary perfected by notaries, art auctioneers, scientists, colonial administrators, and even artists. This is a neutrality which, in all its cruelty, is exemplified in the series of prints of the Benin Bronzes based on historical museum labels that show us how these artefacts have been seen in the West since 1897, as they were auctioned by British looters and their local accomplices (*A Very Fine Cast, 110 years*). Aside from all kinds of errors in the descriptive texts, the way in which “objects” stolen from a continent described by the Europeans as having no civilization and no art, by those who then speculate on the financial value acquired because they had been stolen from a King, demonstrates the need for ethical reparation. The British colonizers not only killed the kings or other leaders, often decapitating them to take their skulls back to Germany or Britain, but also often destroyed the legendary palaces and stole religious objects and symbols of political power.<sup>8</sup> Colonization was not only about the extraction of resources and forced labour but also about the humiliation and degradation of the human spirit. European colonisation of Africa

5 Balzano, G.(2024). “Understanding Collateral Damage in Everyday Life from Military Operations”, 27 Sep 2024, *NATO*. Available at: <https://nrdc-ita.nato.int/newsroom/insights/understanding-collateral-damage-in-everyday-life-from-military-operations>

6 Silverman, D. (2020). “Too late to apologize? Collateral Damage, Post-Harm Compensation, and Insurgent Violence in Iraq”. *International Organization* 74, n.º 4, pp. 853–871, doi:10.1017/S0020818320000193

7 NATO, op. cit.

8 See: Adje, S. & LeGall, Y. (2024). *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums*. Pluto Press.

9 Video of *The Visitor*.

10 Ibid.

not only resorted to widespread armed conquest, massacres, and the exploitation of resources; it was also about the appropriation of spiritual and political symbols. Colonial plunder has filled European museums and private collections. But I loved the answer of the late Oba to Orlow, “I have not memory, so I am not going to be much help”, after the latter explained his work on the necessity of returning the looted Benin bronzes, and why and how “collective memory is constituted through objects, through artefacts.”<sup>9</sup> “I have no memory” is followed by the declaration, “We want those things to come back.”<sup>10</sup>

What this seems to express is that memory is not about the past but the present, which is what Orlow is aiming at. However, what we hear and see in the video *The Visitor* becomes more complex in by the video installation *Lost Wax (2007–2008)*, which shows on seven screens the continuing contemporary practice of casting bronze by craftsmen organized in a guild with royal permission and working in the open air, on Igun street in Benin City. The process of gathering scraps of metal to obtain the material they need to make a cast of a head, their workshop, their membership in a guild with royal permission, the care they take to realize the objects with their bare hands—all of this adds another dimension to the debate about returns. Though the need for returns and restitutions should not be up for debate (while demands must be answered without imposing conditions), these films foreground the question of the value the art market attributes to African (as well as Asian, Oceanian, or Caribbean) looted cultural heritage, which is based on norms of authenticity dictated by Western curators and art historians, the law of private property in capitalism, and the role played by billionaire private collectors versus the value attributed to the work of African craftsmen capable of creating today similar pieces of art. If European colonialism and imperialism denied equality to non-Western art and civilizations,—often dismissing them even after looting their heritage and artworks—the objects later gained value and entered into the capitalist economy as commodities

and capital, subject to speculation and circulation in public institutions that in fact operate like private ones. By raising all kinds of questions, *The Visitor* shows that the question of return and reparation cannot be reduced to that of mere property and economic value, and that if looting is a crime that must find reparation, it did not at all stop African creativity.

## Collateral Memory

“If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. What is the status of Algeria? A systematized de-humanization. It was absurd to undertake, at whatever cost, to bring into existence a certain number of values, when the lawlessness, the inequality, the multi-daily murder of man were raised to the status of legislative principles”, Frantz Fanon wrote in his 1956 letter of resignation to the Resident Minister, Governor General of Algeria, during the Algerian war of liberation.<sup>11</sup> He added, “the decision I have reached is that I cannot continue to bear a responsibility at no matter what cost, on the false pretence that there is nothing else to be done.”<sup>12</sup> As Fanon explained in *Black Skin, White Mask and The Wretched of the Earth*,<sup>13</sup> colonial occupation and colonial war were breeding grounds for mental disorders, and they cannot provide the soil upon which humans are no longer estranged from their environment. The collateral damage of colonial occupation and settler colonialism is also psychic. The settler cannot claim innocence because, as Aimé Césaire wrote, “colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism.”<sup>14</sup> If only liberation from settler colonialism will offer a respite from mental anxiety, depression, paranoia, what kind of psychiatric cure can exist under colonial occupation?

*Unmade Film* raises this question in troubling ways. In this project, Orlow explores the origins of the psychiatric

11 Fanon, F. (1956). “Letter of Resignation”. *Fondation Frantz Fanon*. Available at: <https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/the-ghost-of-frantz-fanon/>

12 Ibid.

13 Fanon, F. (2021). *Black Skin, White Mask*. Penguin; (2005). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.

14 Césaire, A. (1955). *Discourse on Colonialism*, *Présence Africaine*, Part 2.

15 Gilroy, P. (2004). *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Columbia University Press; Mitscherlich, A. & M. (1975). *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, Grove Press.

16 Meari, L. (2015). “Reconsidering Trauma: Towards a Palestinian Community Psychology”. *Journal of Community Psychology* 43, n° 1, p. 77.

hospital Kfar Shaul near Jerusalem, telling a troubling story of erasure, of the wish to repress and bury a narrative so deep that it will be forgotten forever and ever. Kfar Shaul was established in 1951 for Holocaust survivors, and Orlow regularly went to this hospital to visit his great aunt, who had survived Auschwitz and spent over 30 years of her life there. Kfar Shaul had been built over the buildings of Deir Yassin, a Palestinian village whose massacre of the population on 9 April 1948 by two Zionist paramilitary organizations is considered a key moment in the Nakba because it led to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, whose homes and lands were then taken by Israeli Jewish settlers. Kfar Shaul even incorporated the buildings that remained intact after the massacre. Who ever thought that the traumas of the surviving victims of the genocide of Jews in Europe could be addressed on the ruins of a Palestinian village whose population has been massacred? Who ever thought that victims would be repaired by settling upon the bodies of other victims? The amount of wilful ignorance required to make such a decision shows how settler colonialism deeply rests not only on erasure but on the capacity to divert attention. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy argues that an inability to overcome the social, psychological, and cultural barriers has prevented Great Britain from coming to terms with the loss of its colonial empire by blaming others for this loss.<sup>15</sup> Gilroy applied to Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s *The Inability to Mourn*, in which they sought to explain the widespread failure in post-war Germany to confront its nation’s Nazi past by evading talking about its crimes, casting the Germans as victims and turning to collective manic defences.

Does Kfar Shaul represent a refusal to mourn? A defensive act to avoid responsibility? A way to confront post-traumatic stress syndrome by recovering another trauma? Palestinians propose another road. They turn to *Sumud* (steadfastness): “The subjectivity of *Sumud* is an anticolonial subjectivity centred on collectivity and sacrifice, and contains political-ethical dimensions.”<sup>16</sup> *Sumud* is a

rejection of the hegemonic “universal” notion of trauma and its subjective and political implication of “psychological human rights-oriented work (as) the only imaginable and legitimate way of enacting political and human emancipation. The hegemonic liberal gaze of psychological human rights work inordinately dwells on the ‘oppressed’ and their redemption from oppression.”<sup>17</sup> By practicing “community psychology in Palestine”, the ideas of resistance and the legitimacy of the anticolonial struggles as part of “the conceptions and preservation of mental health” are affirmed. Thus Kfar Shaul cannot be a place of overcoming trauma because it addresses neither individual nor collective trauma—it only offers a place to bury memories.

“We have to face the ghosts of the past. We have to acknowledge what has been repressed”, Orlow says, which “also means confronting the present and accepting that the past is not past. It is not over. It haunts us—the ‘haunting’ continues precisely through these ghosts.” The way to enact freedom in the present is to welcome the ghosts of the past and make them our companions in the abolitionist struggle.

17 Ibid., p. 78.