

# (RE)MAKING OF HISTORIES — EMBODIED MEMORIES OF A VERBAL ARCHIVE IN THE WORK OF SANDIM MENDES

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This article was written in a dialogical style, as Sandim described the intricacies of her work, reliving pieces selected for this publication; Mariana attempted to deal with the limitations of language regarding vicarious understandings of what each work of art entails; and through description and writing they both collaborated in composing this article.

What capacity does a single image have to mirror unknown stories? How can intergenerational modes of sharing and storytelling become archival resources of that which is unaccounted for? In what ways can inherited memories catalyse artistic production? For over a decade, visual artist Sandim Mendes has been conducting photographic – and what she calls “imagic” – investigations to inquire into embodied inheritances in relation to geocultural ancestries. Sandim’s practice encompasses an archival production derived from her family stories, contributing towards the amplification of archives of diaspora descent, experiences, and Histories.

## History

Since 2015, the attacks on movements such as Decolonise the University have demonstrated the extent to which contemporary global politics is interwoven with authoritarian utterances, articulated within colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative canons.<sup>1</sup> These attacks have been articulated through discourses on the “need to preserve” culture, expressed through the refusal to remove statues honouring white colonisers and imperial supremacists.

As the work of many – including Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Gloria Wekker, Jack Halberstam, and Nana Adusei-Poku – has long demonstrated, when what is considered valid are privileged Western onto-epistemologies, imposed through indivisible socio-politico-educational and cultural complexes, then what those Western onto-epistemologies place ‘outside’ is deemed ‘other’, secondary, and not-as-good-as. Yet, capital ‘H’ History is still told with very little or no

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Decolonising the University please see:

Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 2018).

Damien Gayle, and Nadia Khomami. “Cecil Rhodes statue row: Chris Patten tells students to embrace freedom of thought.” <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/13/cecil-rhodes-statue-row-chris-patten-tells-students-to-embrace-freedom-of-thought>, (January 13, 2016).

acknowledgement of those whose lives are considered dispensable, less than Human, and (still) living precariously due to the perpetuation of white supremacy and white fragility.<sup>2</sup>

Visual artist Sandim Mendes is of Cabo Verdean descent, born in the Netherlands, a country that, like Portugal, has been dealing with demands to acknowledge and repair the ongoing violence and marginalising effects of the countries' colonial legacy. Sandim uses her own experience to expose confrontations derived from being born in a country where notions of belonging are construed on behalf of the other, and where one's own agency regarding identity is constantly confronted with social, political, cultural and educational expectations that perpetuate Western colonial canons.

### RESISTING ERASURE, RESISTING NON-ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Between 2009 and 2010, on her path to graduating with a degree in fine art, Sandim began to address questions of ancestry, identity, histories and memory through her work. *Rapazinho*, 2009, is one of her first attempts to try to recreate an image of a person for whom there was no visual record: Sandim's paternal grandfather. Likewise, in *Genoveva*, 2009, we see Sandim representing her mother at a younger age. Yet, here the image has a face, and the meaning of having a face or not is attributed to "what felt right at the time".<sup>3</sup> Sandim says that her strongest driver is intuition: she follows momentary impulses leading to the choices made in her photographic arrangements and manipulations. This is evident in *Januari*, 2009, and *Lucinda*, 2009, the portraits of Sandim as her maternal grandparents, where she tried to (re)create what she remembered of their house, the local environment, the feeling of *being* at her grandparents' house in Cabo Verde.<sup>4</sup>

In *Rapasinhas*, 2010, the focal point changed, due to the incorporation of gender as a social marker:

Mariana: Did people confuse you with a boy?

Sandim: Yes. All the time!

*Rapasinhas* poses a visual inquiry into what makes the heteronormative eye see someone as male. It was an attempt at generating different possibilities based on photographic arrangements of clothing and accessories, a play with detail in order to understand the extent to which these details affect a binary gendering of the person in the image. Additionally, Sandim was exploring photography as a medium, experimenting with different modes of image manipulation to achieve what she now describes as a "sense of realness", a search for characteristics that would make the image look dated,

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<sup>2</sup> For white fragility see: Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 3 (3) (2011) pp 54-70.

<sup>3</sup> Sandim Mendes in conversation with Mariana Aboim, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 29th December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article Cabo Verde is written in Portuguese, the English translation is Cape Verde.

as if it were an original picture of her grandfather at a young age. In dealing with intersecting layers of social prejudice (white-cisgender-heteronormativity), whilst attempting to re-create, re-imagine, re-visit what was real, but for which there were no visual records, something particular emerges in Sandim's work. She began exploring what Fatima El-Tayeb describes as a "persistent resistance to erasure, Sisyphean as it must appear to the individual whose very existence is casually and constantly negated by society, which is the first step toward a queering of ethnicity, the source of a post-ethnic, translocal minoritarian movement creating a counternarrative, told in various languages, that makes visible, and thus ultimately ineffective, the mechanisms of colour-blindness."<sup>5</sup>

When doing a study exchange at the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, USA, 2009, Sandim was introduced to Intersectionality from a fine art educational perspective. The term Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and in 2009 it was already embedded in some university curricula in the US. Working at the intersection of Critical Race Theory and Law, Crenshaw addressed the ways different layers of identity can contribute to one's exposure to, and affliction by, social prejudices. Sandim was also introduced to discourses that critically questioned the way Western thought reduces the plurality of African diasporas to a homogenised African identity. *Pão, pão, queijo, queijo*, 2010, focuses on repetition and sameness in its attempt to deal with this plurality, weaving questions of identity and belonging, reflecting the diversity of cultures through different ways of using a headscarf. Ultimately, *Pão, pão, queijo, queijo* addresses the potential problems deriving from white Western ignorance, as well as their impact(s) on one's identity formation.

In the Netherlands, colour-blindness is uttered with pride by white inhabitants as a way of expressing the belief of living in a post-racial utopia, thus dismissing the violence imposed through homogenising markers (especially, but not exclusively) on one's racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. In *White Innocence*, 2016, Gloria Wekker gives an account of how Dutch 'colour blindness' sustains a system of inclusion and exclusion simply by pretending that 'everything is ok': talking about the problem makes 'you' become the problem.<sup>6</sup>

Hidden patterns of racism are not seen by those who, either intentionally or 'innocently', embrace whiteness as an ideology. A clear example is the celebration of Saint Nicholas's holiday, when it is common for a white man to dress as Saint Nicholas and be accompanied by his helper Black Piet, a man with his face painted black. Black Piet was once a Moor from Spain sent to help Saint Nicholas; he was said to have been sent to scare misbehaving children; his face was dirty from falling down

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<sup>5</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 173.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 50.

chimneys. This tradition has been contested for its deeply racist history and what it represents: a patriarchal supremacist punishing relation. However, in the Netherlands, the basis for a tolerant, as opposed to a just, society is homogenising normality through assimilation, reflecting monoethnicism and monoculturalism.<sup>7</sup> Integration is imperative for those who wish to live in the country, one must accept its ‘open mindedness’, ‘all-welcoming’ and ‘multicultural’ characteristics. As such, the attempt to address hidden patterns of racism, such as Black Piet, is seen as not being accepting of other, namely Dutch culture, and thus not welcomed. This homogenisation is an excuse to hide forms of discrimination. As pointed throughout Decolonizing the University movements, it is rooted in academic curricula and discourses, and, as mentioned above, it has major effects on students’ identity formation. However, by pointing out a problem, one is creating disturbance; if one disturbs, one is not welcomed, which leads to the impossibility of addressing the violence inflicted by institutionalised canons (i.e. the perpetual characterisation of The Artist as a white man).

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha develops the concept of colonial mimicry – the desire to shape an *other* as visually different so as to be easily identified as such.<sup>8</sup> Bhabha further explains that the overrepresentation of the ‘normal’ colonial subject is a strategy to implement an authoritarian discourse, which aims at establishing a form of governance by ensuring that the other understands themselves as both inappropriate, and that their inappropriate ‘being’ is under scrutiny. The expectations formed throughout these experiences of being constantly questioned affect the ways one responds to specific interactions: I am being confused with a man, so perhaps I need to be more female; the colour patterns in my work reflect... well, something ‘not Dutch’; it is the constant reliving of what it means to be perceived as the other in one’s own country. The demands implicit in these comments reflect what is required for assimilation made on behalf of what the Dutch call ‘gezellig’: keeping things cosy, keeping it pleasant. Complaining is not ‘gezellig’, cursing at someone who misgenders you, or standing against racist remarks made at one’s art practice – especially as a student, when institutional hierarchies can determine the progress of your career – is not ‘gezellig’, and shapes the ‘complainer’ as the problem.

## **EMBODIMENT AND MEMORY**

As a student, Sandim had to deal with the hierarchical structures at play: students comply with the requirements and are graded by teachers. The difficulty of uttering these experiences led to some of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>8</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York — London, Routledge, 1990), 121-131.

Sandim's photographic investigations and remain a crucial marker on what her work is doing – the creation of a family archive, an archive of ancestry and Cabo Verde's histories.

*Rapazinho* seeks a form of embodied representation, an attempt to visualise the missing images of (Sandim's) paternal grandfather. In addition, *Rapazinhos* poses a response to ongoing and imposing markers of heteronormativity, exposing socio-cultural dispossessions of agency on behalf of perpetuating colonial-Christian understanding(s) of 'normalcy'. The latter work exposes the very material effects racist and sexist markers inflict on one's self-development and wellbeing.

Sandim's work is an embodiment of Denise Ferreira da Silva's definition of virtuality: that which has the capacity of transversability of space-time intersections and crossings; a cut through space-time linearity, out of which a bodily traversability occurs; and transubstantiality, the bodily transformations possible due to multiple existing(s).<sup>9</sup> Sandim transverses space-time herself, she visits the stories that have been told throughout her life in order to create the missing pieces from her family's archive. In these travels through her ancestry, Sandim sees the missing imagery, hence she says, "I think images," and it is upon her return from these visits that works such as *Lucinda*, *Genoveva*, and *E so mi* emerged, with Sandim portraying herself as the embodiment of her ancestry.

## DOING THE ARCHIVE

So how does one overcome the paradox of creating an archive out of immaterial components? Sandim surpasses the tensions of historiography through oral registers of collective and inherited knowledge, combined with documentary photography.

In *When u reap what u sow II*, 2017, Sandim points to the labour hierarchies within the textile industry in the Netherlands. Specifically, the work engages with the textile production in Enschede, which began disappearing in the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup> Sandim's research project focused on the lack of acknowledgement of the lives of black and enslaved people without whom this industry would have never been built.

Inspired by the shape of an old shuttle, a part of weaving machines, Sandim's mind instinctively gravitated towards its resonance with the movement and shape of a slave ship, the container carrying the lives of those who made much of the textile industry possible, including the Dutch West Indies Company. In TwentseWelle, the museum for nature and culture where Sandim did much of her research for this project, she found only "one little painting that depicted black figures working on

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<sup>9</sup> da Silva develops virtuality in her analysis of Octavia E. Butler's novels *Kindred*, *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> "History," City of Enschede, Accessed: January 6, 2021, <https://cityofenschede.com/aboutenschede/history/>.

the land, picking cotton with white overseers watching closely.”<sup>11</sup> As a response, Sandim developed her own *tjap*, the label-pattern whose function was to attract the targeted group for whom the textile was made. Sandim designed a *tjap* to acknowledge not only the presence of, but the conditions in which slaves were transported, mistreated, and made to work in the textile industry.<sup>12</sup>

Making information visible that is unaccounted for, historically dismissed facts, and stories for which there are only oral accounts for is part of Sandim’s artistic practice. The imagery resulting from Sandim’s historical inquiries contains a sense of ‘realness’, *Genoveva* and *Rapazinho* were real in a specific time and place, their re-embodiment through descent creates the archival imagery through an artwork that acknowledges their histories. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, “[t]he loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them.”<sup>13</sup> The lack of family records propelled a deeper and embodied relation with ancestry than what these photographs reveal. Sandim’s maternal grandfather was a *griot*, a storyteller, the elder whose mission was to keep traditions and histories of the island alive. Thus, photographing embodied ancestry here is much more profound: it is the embodiment of the one whose function was to preserve stories, preserve the culture, preserve history in the present, alive. Sandim is becoming a *griot* herself, whilst trying to understand where these histories come from.

The transformations Sandim experienced throughout the past decade mirror an intergenerational phenomenology of embodiment. When surrounded by the installation *Ta bem um tempo ki*, 2017, one is absorbed by the voice of Sandim’s mother telling a story that used to belong to her *griot* father: a wondering of what the people from Cabo Verde might encounter in a seemingly dystopian future. *Ta bem um tempo ki* is a visual essay that contributes to what Saidiya Hartman seeks with “recombinant narratives,” the exposure of fictions historicised in the archives of slavery, and the refusal of the obliteration of any narrative other than those perpetuating white supremacy.<sup>14</sup> Sandim does that by filling gaps through embodied, inherited, and shared memories and histories of her own family, creating an archive as a form of artistic production. Concurrently, Sandim’s work has been enriching Cabo Verde’s cultural archive with the recreation of eroded material that was once made with the purpose of cultivating and maintaining the histories that engendered its own culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Sandim Mendes in conversation with Mariana Aboim, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 29 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the industry, its development and history, please see:

<https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/el-mina-sao-jorge-da-mina/>

<https://mijnstadmijndorp.nl/app/historisch-centrum-overijssel/verhalen/1859-van-heek-co-te-enschede>

<sup>13</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, Volume 12, Number 2, no. 26 (June 2008): 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

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