***Infinity is a strange concept***

***Even more strange is an infinite blackness***

***Moving through time as the unheard shrieks and hollering of hollow husks buried 2ft under***

***This is what lies in the underbelly of our engagement***

***Do not fear the infinite specter; dwell in its torn heart and through its eyes see a better future………..***

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Here it is important to be clear: **proposing a punctum for the** Paris Match **image is far from a simple matter of recovering a repressed history, rather it entails pointing to the impossibility of** Barthes’s **negation of that history. It involves calling attention to its lingering presence, the way that history lived on** in Barthes’s work, **even as he failed to acknowledge it directly. It means identifying the disconcerting presence of an absence.** In other words, such a **hauntology exposes the presence of a “radical non negativity,”** in the words Steve Shaviro uses to point out **that which refuses to be put to rest.** For Shaviro, **the ghostly trace becomes “a kind of residual, quasi material insistence, that disrupts and ruins every movement of negation or negativity. That’s what the ghost is,** after all: **something that is gone,** or **dead, but that refuses to be altogether absent; something that is not here, not now, but that continues to stain or contaminate or affect or impinge upon the here and now**.”In other words, **this radical non negativity points to the way** photography, as a **ghostly non presence**, or as **the disturbing presence of an absence,** repeatedly calls attention **to the colonial past** in Barthes’s work from the image of Brazza in Camera Lucida , to the portrait of his colonist grandfather in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes yet in a way that could not be directly addressed or historically elaborated. We are left with the traces of a disavowal, one that will not quite go away. From here we can reassess the significance of Vita Nova : if it offers a new life to historical documents, like the cover of Paris Match , then this life is open, transformative, and partly unnamed. This aspect is exemplified when the video, toward its end, shows Kaboré receiving a copy of the magazine the first time he has ever seen the issue fifty years after the photographs taken of him appeared in it (and the first time we see the whole cover). **The** moving **encounter enables a certain remembrance to occur**, experienced by Kaboré and shared with his grandchildren , as shown in the video. **These figures become caught in the swirl of a cyclical history that is mutually estranging: the old man returns to his own image, which is given a second life, but it is one that renders him unrecognizable from age**. **Similarly, his grandsons recognize themselves uncannily in the image of their grandfather as a boy, but the historical context is completely different.** Rather than reconstructing past events retrospectively , then, Meessen’s work provokes new and future events prospectively. **Its modeling of performative** documentary thus offers a mixture of historical documents, storytelling and fabulation, **and unscripted social situations, all of which converge in a transformative moment in the present and construct a creative pedagogy for the future.** Kobena Mercer points out the redemptive aspect of this gesture: **“Giving a new life or a second life to images of colonised subjects who would otherwise be unnamed and unknown, Meessen’s film enacts a postcolonial gesture of ‘redemptive return’ whereby archival material, instead of being dead and buried in the past, flashes up into contemporary time in a critical moment of delayed awakening that reveals the unfinished afterlife of the colonial relation.”** This modeling of performative documentary is demonstrated in the film’s scenes portraying an outdoor cinema that Meessen reconstructed at the former Ouagadougou cadets’ barracks (which today has become a high school). Burkinabés are shown watching passages from La force noire, a 2007 film by Eric Deroo, which offers an official account of the colonized African people’s participation in France’s wars, with footage drawn from the French Ministry of Defense’s archives. A spiraling history unfolds in Meessen’s filmic montage that joins these distinct events. For instance, the film shows African troops parading in the Palais des Sportsas the Vel’ d’Hiv, the old indoor cycle track, was renamed after the war, in part to distance the site from its notorious past when it had been used as an assembly point for those deported to the death camps during World War II. Yet if it does so, then Vita Nova reveals that the historical image’s meaning will remain forever unfinished, ever capable of producing new mythologies, ever holding the potential to animate new ghosts. fig. 12: Vita Nova (shot of Kabore with grandchildren, looking at Paris Match) In this sense, the fact Les Nuits de L’Armée took place there in 1955 proposes an appalling connection between the history of anti Semitism and the Holocaust and French colonialism. Yet now, it is the Africans who appear as the spectators, owing to the intercutting of shots in Vita Nova : they watch their earlier selves and observe the original French audience a half century later. Do they now sit in judgment of that col onial spectacle, of that celebration of militarism and French patriotism against the backdrop of their complicity in racism and genocide? Are its menacing ghosts finally put to rest when this history of oppression and domination is brought to a measure of historiographic justice? While this conclusion may be one we can never verify and thus only speculate upon we do witness a transgenerational transmission, where the now grandfather aged men share their nearly forgotten experiences of those earlier colonial days with their grandchildren, some of whom serve in the military of independent Burkina Faso. **History becomes a medium of repetition and difference recalling, according to Barthes, the punctum of the “lacerating of time”; for Derrida, that which “de sync hronizes” and “recalls us to anachrony.**”As Vita Nova ’s narrator explains, reincarnating the words of Barthes, **“history is a spiral. Time brings back previous states, but the spiral’s circles expand, none ever produces its exact copy. History is as a polyphonic of strokes of light and mist that answer each other constantly. On the spiral’s trajectory, everything recurs, but in another higher place, it is the return of difference, the movement of metaphor**, it is Fiction.”While Vita Nova constructs an educational exercise that catalyzes remembrance in the postcolonial present, it simultaneously offers a critical history of French literary discourse from the 1950s, when authors such as Barthes contributed to the exposure and critique of imperialist visual  culture. Yet even as Barthes’s pathbreaking analysis contributed to the delegitimation of colonial mythology, his writings also disavow the complicities and responsibilities that were closer to home. It is in this disavowal that Vita Nova intervenes. First, in addressing Barthes’s early semio critique of colonial ideology, the video speculates about the punctum that implicates the personal history haunting Barthes’s texts, which enacted an erasure that also uncannily revealed the repressed. Here, hauntology finds its definition in the negative ontology of representation: “the spectral is not ”; it is “neither substance, nor essence, nor existence,” as Derrida writes, it “ is never present as such. ”Second, the film exposes and rejects the subjective phenomenolo gy of Camera Lucida , which typifies Barthes’s move away from ideological critique and, more specifically, his disavowal of the political image economy of colonialism, which as we have seen was intertwined with his family history. In the end, we are led to conclude that Barthes’s later analytical tendencies corresponded to a revealing repression, one that reappeared in Barthes’s work in its very non negativity, in its ghostly presence, as magnified in Meessen’s art. As such, Vita Nova contributes to the work of historical recovery. For its **hauntology, furthermore, serves as a model for how the punctum and stadium might find some reconnection, if not reconciliation, in an experimental historiography both subjectively implicative, historically and politically aware, and sensitive to representational complexity. Such a historiography would be founded not on the easy availability of historical presence, but rather on the impossibility of history’s totalizing impulse, on the insistence of the radical non negativity that haunts historical consciousness and representation. It would thereby challenge all historicism that is founded upon a strict sense of chronology or that conceptually solidifies the past.** Finally, these points identify the particular significance of Meessen’s work in the present, in a context where French culture, education, and politics like much of European discourse from Holland to Italy, Belgium to Germany have been moving toward a neorevisionist “imperial winter,” one defined by a growing historical amnesia matched, not surprisingly, by a colonial nostalgia.Indeed, postcolonial studies has received a conspicuously delayed reception in France, coming to light only in the last decade (despite the rich history of resistance movements in the colonies, and the theoretical analyses by writers such as Fanon, Césaire, and AlbertMemmi), and remains at best a continually embattled discipline there. It is one whose belated appearance corresponds to rightwing efforts to renounce inherited traditions of internationalism and anticolonialism and, likewise, to rid the country of its complex legacy of Marxism and the memory of the social and political struggles of 1968 including the solidarity movement with the Third World.

***Remember what you cannot remember***

***It is the impossibility that makes remembrance possible***

***Linger on what you have not felt***

***And presence that which is not there anymore***

**Hartman 2k8** (Saidiya, Venus in Two Acts, Small Axe, Number 26 (Volume 12, Number 2), pp. 1-14 Article)

Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, **I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of “what could have been,” according to Lisa Lowe, “symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods.**”34 **The intention here isn’t anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives** precisely through the process of narration. The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. “Fabula” denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and event.”35 By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, **I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis “what happened when” and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives** (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), **to describe “the resistance of the object**,”36 if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity. By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.37 **Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man**.38 **The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance.** It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive. Admittedly my own writing is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive. It depends upon the legal records, surgeons’ journals, ledgers, ship manifests, and captains’ logs, and in this regard falters before the archive’s silence and reproduces it omissions. The irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered. This formidable obstacle or constitutive impossibility defines the parameters of my work. **The necessity of recounting Venus’s death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved. In retelling the story of what happened on board the Recovery, I have emphasized the incommensurability between the prevailing discourses and the event, amplified the instability and discrepancy of the archive, flouted the realist illusion customary in the writing of history, and produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical. Counter-history, according to Gallagher and Greenblatt, “opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of historical thought and methods of research**.”39 However, the history of black counter-historical projects is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain a footing. If this story of Venus has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers. A relation which others might describe as a kind of melancholia, but which I prefer to describe in terms of the afterlife of property, by which I mean the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril. For these reasons, I have chosen to engage a set of dilemmas about representation, violence, and social death, not by using the form of a metahistorical discourse, but by performing the limits of writing history through the act of narration. I have done so primarily because (1) my own narrative does not operate outside the economy of statements that it subjects to critique; and (2) those existences relegated to the nonhistorical or deemed waste exercise a claim on the present and demand us to imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended. **The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future. My effort to reconstruct the past is, as well, an attempt to describe obliquely the forms of violence licensed in the present, that is, the forms of death unleashed in the name of freedom, security, civilization, and God/the good. Narrative is central to this effort because of “the relation it poses, explicit or implied, between past, presents and futures.**”40 Wrestling with the girl’s claim on the present is a way of naming our time, thinking our present, and envisioning the past which has created it. Unfortunately I have not discovered a way of deranging the archive so that it might recall the content of a girl’s life or reveal a truer picture, nor have I succeeded in prying open the dead book, which sealed her status as commodity. The random collection of details of which I have made use are the same descriptions, verbatim quotes, and trial transcripts that consigned her to death and made murder “not much noticed,” at least, according to the surgeon.41

***Your signature dances vicariously around the ballot***

***Giving a frame to the faceless, the shapeless, the nameless black masses***

***It’s a candle that you ignite***

***Illuminating all the black ghosts***

***And giving a toast to this eulogy***

***So we can see***

***All the cracks in modernity***

***The impossibility that makes a possibility***

***For me to be free***