

The Body's Legacies Pt. 2 The Postcolonial Body

KADER ATTIA

Hidden injuries unseen by white privilege



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Kader Attia's film essay, 'The Body's Legacies Part 2: The Postcolonial Body' isn't an easy pill to swallow. It makes no attempt at sugar-coating but is essential viewing for those of us still giving credence to a bygone, blissful ignorance that has been coined as 'colour blindness' and is the preserve of the white and privileged.

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It is an austere four hander where intellectual activists — the philosopher Norman Ajari, the journalist Louisa Yousifi, the author, critic and curator Oliver Marboeuf and Amine Khaled, literary advisor for Paris' Théâtre Rond Point — are interviewed in isolation and in different settings.

With no intervention from Attia himself, each interviewee enounces, with tangible restraint, their vision of the individual and collective ongoing damage that the heritage of colonial violence imposes on non-white bodies; how they are perceived, including by those who inhabit them, how they move, interact and are treated in public space.

Their separate monologues are edited to interlace and corroborate, but they also converge around a central, dramatic incident: the affair Théo Luhaka. In 2017 a young black man was the victim of police brutality during a spot check and was allegedly raped with the result of him sustaining irreparable internal injury.

There are two moments when the talking is interrupted by silent footage. The first a series of stills of individuals soberly going about their daily business in Paris. The second the original CC footage of the police assault on Luhaka. Several armed policemen wrestle the solitary, unarmed black man to the ground. The lack of sound only enhances the horror and violence of the scene.

The most seemingly matter of fact speaker is Oliver Marboeuf, sitting relaxed at a table with a coffee pot and croissant. Yet the physiological contortions he describes, provoked by feelings of loss or absence of legitimacy, are perhaps the most disturbing. He cites his own experience, that of being one of a family of

nine, born to a French mother and a father from the French West Indies. He recalls the implicit instruction received from his father for the whole family to assimilate, to be as invisible as possible, to, in effect, disappear — a physically impossible feat.

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'The internal contradictions that that sort of message produces, especially for a growing adolescent, give rise to all measure of both physical and mental tension', explains Marboeuf. 'I think that the systemic principles later produce psychic principles, so this sort of body begins to work against itself… there's the notion of self-hate, the incapacity of accepting or appreciating oneself that then produces an almost excessive need to be seen and to exist because we think we are not loved.'

Similar personal or societal paradoxes are encountered in other examples. From the humiliation described by Khaled induced by the assumption of guilt until proven innocent to the criminalising of self-defence in multiple cases of police brutality outlined by Ajari. Ajari goes on, with mounting emotion, to explain that even the appreciation of Black music by white audiences bears witness to a certain revelling in black suffering, much Black music being created in circumstances of oppression.

The multi-layered revelations are not always easy to grasp or follow and the form of the film makes no concession for this. You have to work hard to stay with it. But today, with the likes of Reni Eddo-Lodge, author of 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race', spelling it out so clearly, the penny is finally dropping that it's up to white people to make the effort now; however worthy or innocent we've felt we've been in the past, that is clearly no longer enough.