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## White Shoals, White Shrouds: Reflections on the Ethics of Looking at Captive Bodies

Axelle Toussaint

In the winter of 2018, I presented a conference paper on a set of nineteenth-century photographs from the national archive of the French colonies. The series, titled “Types Comoriens” (Comorian types), comprises seven photographs commissioned by the French *École Coloniale* between 1890 and 1896. The *École Coloniale* was a French colonial school created in 1889, dedicated to recruiting and training French colonial administrators. The school was instrumental to both the institutionalization of colonial knowledge and the development of French higher education.<sup>1</sup>

The images are full-length portraits of seven young Comorian natives, naked, standing in front of a white background. My essay looked at the beaded strings that the indigenous islanders wore around their waists, which I traced back to an East African puberty ritual called *umyago*. Subsumed in the minutiae of my anthropological analysis, I did not register the violence that had been folded into the photographic frame. Nor did I realize that I, myself, was reenacting the voyeuristic gaze of the colonial photographer by re-producing these images in my conference presentation. For my presentation, I cropped the subjects’ naked bodies but decided to show their faces. Even then, this timid gesture seemed insufficient, uncomfortably incomplete.

Seven little heads pinned on the white page of my PowerPoint. Seven faces that I read as sad, angry, and dejected, now floating in white space, brought as offering to an intellectually voracious audience of (mostly white male) researchers, who, ushered in by my neutral tone, my policed words, my rehearsed speech,

craved some sort of visual support, the beginning of a picture that they could then complete in their imaginations. And I delivered it to them. That day, while playing my part as a researcher, I surely failed my political responsibilities as a citizen and as a spectator of these photographs. I failed the ethical demands of the decolonial gaze that I intended to perform, and the memory of these children that I pretended to defend. The present essay is an account of my multiple returns to these difficult, terrible images. It offers a reflection on the ongoing violence of the colonial gaze and the ethics of looking at captive bodies in the archive, as I wonder: How do we remember those whose lives have been “recorded in the act of their annihilation?”<sup>2</sup> How do we attend to the past without committing further violence?

### Gathering

My second reading of the “Types Comoriens” series required a radical shift in my understanding of the ontology of photography. I had first considered the seven photographs as material evidence of *what has been* (as Roland Barthes puts it), as a reflection of some past reality, and this line of inquiry had led me to an impasse: it was impossible to determine the subjects’ identity, their origins, and whether they had gone through slavery. It seemed that nothing could be said about the past that wouldn’t involve further description and reobjectification of the subjects.

I am thankful to Ariella Azoulay for getting me out of this impasse. Azoulay asks us to see photography not as a finite moment in time but as an open-ended event whose political stakes reach out to us, viewers, in the present. The “event of photography,” as Azoulay conceives it, is constituted by a series of encounters between a multiplicity of participants: the camera, the person who stands behind its lens (the photographer), whoever faces its lens (the photographed person), and the spectator of photography (who is, today, virtually everyone).<sup>3</sup> Rather than a mere reflection of the relations that have taken place in front of the camera in the past, photography *enacts* a series of relations between its participants. The “Types Comoriens” photographs function as a space of encounter between the photographed subjects, the photographer, me, and you—as you too are invited to look at these images. Through our common condition as spectators, we form part of a universal civil polity that Azoulay calls the “cizenry of photography.”<sup>4</sup> For Azoulay, spectatorship is a fundamentally emancipatory practice: each participant to the event of photography contributes to the process of meaning making; each spectator has the power and, further, the *obligation* to intervene, to take action against the unfair and the intolerable<sup>5</sup> by “reconstruct[ing] what was there from both what is visible and what is not immediately manifest, but what can—in principle—*become*

visible in the same exact photograph.”<sup>6</sup> I’ve been thinking with Azoulay because her theory endows the spectators of photography with a responsibility that I was eager to assume, by suggesting that colonial photographs do not simply function as evidence of past injustices but as live battlegrounds, sites where meaning is still—and always—in the making.

Taking up Azoulay’s injunction to take part, the present piece is an attempt at a feminist decolonial praxis of looking at captive (as in, captured by the camera) black and indigenous bodies. In it, I attempt to exercise my civil duties of spectatorship by reconstituting the photographic *mise-en-scène*, making present the figure of the photographer (whose role in the *mise-en-scène* is often rendered invisible, naturalized within the frame), and attending to the meanings enforced or erased by previous readings. This essay is also an invitation for us, spectators of photography, for you and for me, to reorient our gaze toward the site of its emergence: our bodies and their traces, the colonial baggage that they carry.

### Pausing and Feeling

Seven “portraits . . .” Here, the caption already lies. The term *portrait* inscribed by one of the spectators of these photographs, perhaps the colonial administrator, and perpetuated by diligent archival agents, seems inappropriate. I am here in the French colonial and this word, *portrait*, makes me feel sick in my stomach, because it implies a *person*, and of people here I see *none*.

Seven bodies pressed against an empty, emptying background. I am disgusted by the view of this white sheet quickly fixed between a rock and a tree, which sets the stage for the unfolding of the voyeur’s desires, disgusted by this clear intention to isolate these seven children as specimens of a “Comorian type,” to remove them from the world.

Seven could-have-been-children forced, one by one, to strip off their clothes to allow the gaze of the colonial administrator to carry out its dehumanizing, violating work. My heart aches for the child who holds on to their kanga, holding it tight in their hand, as if it were of their modesty, of their faith, of their humanness, which is being denied to them.

My *mal d’archive* is not a fever, it’s a nausea: I feel sick at the ignominious sight of the subjects’ full-frontal nudity, of their clothes lying on the ground in a pile, of this white sheet thrown in a hurry to separate these bodies from the world of the free and the living, to delimit the space of their violation.

I read these images again alongside Hortense Spillers’s text “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” This reading practice allows me to

see that the bodies presented here are pure abstraction, an ensemble of coded signs without material reality. There are two crucial steps in the resignifying process at stake. The first takes place in front of the camera and is constituted by the encounter between photographer and photographed object. The camera operates what Hortense Spillers calls a “theft of the body,” turning each of these seven bodies into undifferentiated flesh, reducing them to an “absence *from* subject position.”<sup>7</sup> In this transmutation of bodies into flesh, “we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions.”<sup>8</sup> Flesh is a visual indeterminacy, a blank canvas onto which a diligent spectator (be they the photographer, the colonial agent, or the archivist) ascribed an identity, picked and chose and named, sometime between now and then: seven “Comorian types,” six so-called *jeunes femmes* (young women) and one *enfant* (male child).

Seven bodies suspended in the photographic, culturally unmade at the fall of the shutter. Seven humans turned into objects—a second death.

The attribution of a caption coincides with the second stage of the resignifying process: the body captured by the camera now “becomes being for the captor,”<sup>9</sup> as it is forced to signify ethnicity, gender, and age. This second stage is that of the re/presentation: uncooked flesh is given a cultural flavor as it is prepared for consumption. By dint of the caption, flesh is resignified, flesh takes on meaning as a culturally comprehensible object onto which the spectator’s scopophilic desires will latch: seven juvenile indigenous bodies, naked.

White and nonblack scholars themselves cannot escape the pull of this pornotropic logic, regardless of their critical or antiracist intentions: when they produce the black body as an object of inquiry, they “transform black figures and forms into ‘captive bodies’ under their scholarly gazes and modes of deconstruction.”<sup>10</sup> “Working on Blackness is always already an erotic project,” writes King. She helps me realize that there is no more picking parts, no heads over bodies, no better or worse: it is all the same undifferentiated, unmade and remade, flesh, and, from this realization, there is no escape. King suggests that “instead of looking to the Black body—whether suffering or in ecstasy—as an object of study, that one attends to or notices their own (white and nonblack) desire(s) for the Black body. Noticing requires one to pause, take a beat, and maybe a breath before proceeding. It requires a slowing of one’s momentum maybe even one’s pulse and a moment to regroup and reorient.”<sup>11</sup> King calls this “conceptual and methodological disturbance” a shoal.<sup>12</sup> Shoals are submerged geological formations that rise near the surface of the water and may “force a vessel to remain off shore—off the littoral—impeding it from reaching its intended destination.”<sup>13</sup> Within Black studies, a shoal

requires that we pause and ask: “What are the sensations, feelings, and desires of the white and non-black body that produce the black body as an object of inquiry?”<sup>14</sup>—but also: “What are the sensations, feelings, and desires that lead us to demand its visibility?” The shoal, as King seems to suggest, operates differently according to one’s positionality: while it might engage white and nonblack scholars/viewers to face their own desire (sexual or otherwise) for the black body, what exactly does it entail for the black viewer? To me, as I cannot speak for others, the shoal as a space of reflection forced me to look at the bias of my own gaze, and to let myself feel the nausea that these photographs conjured. It also made me face my responsibility toward the archival captives and the dead.

Two years have passed since the conference. I return to the images, reflecting on the ways in which they have worked for me as, perhaps, tokens of my scientific legitimacy. Going farther back in time, I wonder: in what haste did the initial spectator (the colonial agent-photographer) find himself when he tucked that sheet under that rock, when he asked these children to strip off their clothes? It is not difficult to imagine that he, who left no trace of himself but the archival record and its laconic captions, was a man—a white man.<sup>15</sup> Did this man succumb to a sudden pulsion, a photographic frenzy to capture and possess, or were these images the fruit of a more concerted effort, a long-hauled fantasy of mastery and control? Could the same voyeuristic desire that animated his interest for Comorian natives underpin our present demands for the visibility of black bodies—in the media, in black studies, and on the white page of my art-historical presentation?

I knew that I needed to talk about these photographs again, or else they would come back to haunt me. I could not make the sovereign decision to remove them from the public view and deny future spectators their rightful demand to see, nor could I bury these bodies back into the archive. I was still sickened by the same view of them: seven ghostly little heads floating in white space, grimacing their distress at me. But how could I disrupt their pornotroping logic? How could I probe the violence that had been perpetrated against their subjects without committing further violence in the act of looking?

*Pause.* What if, I wondered, we imagined the shoal as a visual disturbance, one that literally impedes access to the captive black and indigenous body?

Still sickened by the same view of those seven little heads floating in white space, recoiling in my brain long after the PowerPoint had been closed, I decided to take action, cut out the images a second time, cutting it all out this time, until all that is left is a blank space, a white shoal. The shoal mimes the violence of the archive when removing captive bodies from our view; yet, where the archive aims at annihilation, the shoal outlines the contours of the violation. Thinking with King, I foreground the white shoal as an ethical praxis of looking at captive bodies,

a feminist decolonial praxis that requires a diversion and redirection of our gaze back onto itself, an attention to our body—and a refusal of visual analysis-as-usual. As King and Azoulay remind me, looking is a particular experience of embodiment that is inherited, learned, never evident, always political—and a praxis through which we can exercise our capacity for freedom.



*Figure 1a Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*



*Figure 1b Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*





*Figure 1c* Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.



*Figure 1d Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*



*Figure 1e Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*



*Figure 1fTypes Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*



*Figure 1g Types Comoriens photographic series, intervened by the author.*

The original records for the “Types Comoriens” photographs are available for consultation on the website of the French Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer at the following links. No matter what you choose to do, to look or not to look, it is reassuring to think that photographs are not finite artifacts generating static effects. Meaning is not fixed, and action is ours to be taken. If you decide to look, will you assume your responsibilities as a citizen of photography?

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=26&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-163](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=26&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-163)<sup>16</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&date=&from=&to=&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=13&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-155](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&date=&from=&to=&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=13&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-155)<sup>17</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=17&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-164](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=17&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-164)<sup>18</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=17&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-153](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=17&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-153)<sup>19</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=21&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-158](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=21&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-158)<sup>20</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&date=&from=&to=&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=14&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&date=&from=&to=&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=14&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165)<sup>21</sup>

[http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=16&hpp=10&id=FR\\_ANOM\\_8Fi15-157](http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ulyse/notice?add=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-165&=&q=&coverage=Comores%2C+Archipel+des&type=Photographie&mode=thumb&page=16&hpp=10&id=FR_ANOM_8Fi15-157)<sup>22</sup>

### Sitting with the Dead

Earlier in this essay, I suggested that the present perfect of photography (photographs as material evidence of *what has been*) should not divert us from *what can be done*, a potentiality granted by our ever-present capacity for freedom. Once we have come to terms with our responsibility as a spectator, what is it that can be done? I am reminded of Saidiya Hartman's warnings about the difficulty of mourning the dead in the archive: "The victor," she writes, "has already won. [The photograph has been taken, the body has been captured]. It is not possible to undo the past."<sup>23</sup> By removing the photographed bodies from the spectator's view, was I not attempting to undo the past, annul the violence, to restore a semblance of justice? The white shoals made me pause and feel the nausea that I had initially repressed. I felt the responsibility to make visible the theft of the body materialized on the photographs, by rendering the subjects' bodies materially invisible. But this too seemed incomplete: the white shoals cannot undo the past, nor can they cancel the violence perpetrated against black and indigenous bodies—a violence that has not yet ceased happening. Animated by a desire to redeem my disastrous academic performance, I mistook my own return with that of the seven captives.

Scholars of the black radical tradition have been trying to articulate methods of encountering an unjust and traumatic past that is not yet past. Hartman suggests that mourning, as a public expression of loss and grief, can help us work through the past, once our bereavement is severed from illusions of recovery or redemption.<sup>24</sup> Christina Sharpe proposes a "method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are."<sup>25</sup>

"Sitting with the Dead" is my third and last return; it consists of the public performance of symbolic acts of mourning. In the Comoros, women are traditionally in charge of the rituals of mourning, the first of which is the covering of the body with a white shroud.<sup>26</sup> For months, I had been pondering how to mourn the multiple violences that I saw at play in the photographs—the violence of French imperialism, of the archive, of the academic conventions of my discipline, and the violence of my own gaze, looking, describing, cutting. After some time, I started seeing the white cutouts not simply as shoals but also as shrouds. I decided to enlarge one of the photographs and paste it to a wall. I brought candles, incense, a bouquet, a loom—the objects associated with mourning in various traditions of which I am a part. For the time it takes for a candle to burn, I sat with the dead. I wished for my body to hold a space for the live memory of the captives and the departed—for a moment there, I felt it made the past more present. The performance left me physically and emotionally depleted, dazed by the intensity of energy





*Figure 2 Axelle Toussaint, Sitting with the Dead, October 2020, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photograph by Axel Isai Revera Saavedra.*



*Figure 3 Axelle Toussaint, Sitting with the Dead, October 2020, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photograph by Jennifer Breuel.*





*Figure 4. Axelle Toussaint, Sitting with the Dead, October 2020, Oaxaca, Mexico. Photograph by Jennifer Breuel.*

required to manifest and sustain such a sad and painful encounter with a past not yet past. Minutes after the performance ended, the discomfort gave way to a clearer sense of what was and what can still be done, of the limits and possibilities of my traversing the multiple and imbricated temporalities of the archive, as a researcher, a politically accountable participant, and a living body. It felt like a momentary calm, a respite of sorts.

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Axelle Toussaint is currently getting her PhD in visual studies at UC Santa Cruz. She holds a Master of Laws from UC Hastings College of the Law and an MA in Art and Design History and Theory from the New School. Her current research examines colonial and postcolonial experiences of trauma and fragmentation in the islands of the western Indian Ocean, and their mediation through visual culture, performance, and imagination.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Singaravélou, *Professer l’Empire: Les “sciences coloniales” en France sous la IIIe République*, Histoire contemporaine 3 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Best, “Neither Lost Nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive,” *Representations* 113, no. 1 (2011): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2011.113.1.150>.

<sup>3</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012), 220.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Azoulay is primarily concerned with photographs taken in disaster zones.

<sup>6</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 159.

<sup>7</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Tiffany Lethabo King, “Off Littorality (Shoal 1.0): Black Study Off the Shores of ‘the Black Body,’” *Propter Nos* 3 (2019): 44–45, [https://www.academia.edu/38170503/\\_Off\\_Littorality\\_Shoal\\_1.0\\_Black\\_Study\\_Off\\_the\\_Shores\\_of\\_the\\_Black\\_Body\\_](https://www.academia.edu/38170503/_Off_Littorality_Shoal_1.0_Black_Study_Off_the_Shores_of_the_Black_Body_).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> See Timothy Collier, “L’École coloniale: La formation des cadres de la France d’outre-mer, 1889–1959” (PhD diss., Aix-Marseille Université, 2008). At the time these photographs were taken, women were barred from working in the French colonial administration.

<sup>16</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/163, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France. Hereafter cited as ANOM.

<sup>17</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/155, ANOM.

<sup>18</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/164, ANOM.

<sup>19</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'un enfant, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/153, ANOM.

<sup>20</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/158, ANOM.

<sup>21</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/165, ANOM.

<sup>22</sup> Types Comoriens, Portrait d'une jeune femme, 1890–1896, FR ANOM 8Fi15/157, ANOM.

<sup>23</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 772, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-4-757>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 771.

<sup>25</sup> Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Chanfi, Françoise Le Guennec-Coppens, and Sophie Mery, "Rites de mort aux Comores et chez les Swahili: Entre islam savant et culture locale," *Journal des Africanistes* 72, no. 2 (2002): 187–201, <https://doi.org/10.3406/jafr.2002.1314>.