The images that Alto Malinda gives us in On Fait Ensemble are full of ambiguity; the boundaries between the past and the present are blurred, just as are the limits between a myth and something tangible. At the beginning of the film we are told that this is Africa in the 21st century, and we see a market from the present day in Cameroon. Simultaneously, the texture of the film gives the sense that it is old – it is faded, almost colorless, as if imprinted on an old strip of film.

Additionally, the figure of Papa Wata walking in the market gives a sensation of something not fixed in any particular time. It is hard to position the figure. It is like a ghost walking in the present, with a brightly painted face that is supposed to symbolize a white man. We also hear in the film that Mama Wata is the offspring of a complex interlinking of moving images, people, and presentations, and thus is born out of past interrelationships between spaces now usually perceived as different parts of the world.

In this piece, I want to reflect on this blurring of boundaries between past and present – between different histories – that the film speaks to and how it brings out interconnectedness, which has become a particularly salient issue to stress in our postcolonial present. I also briefly reflect on what I find the film saying on the recurrent racist portrayal of black bodies.

I start out by mapping some of the wider context that I see the film speaking to – at least to myself – and then briefly how it intervenes in the troublesome entanglements of the present with the past, while these entanglements and their association to power are often concealed in contemporary discourses. I will in this regard briefly address how the “Nordic” has been seen as existing in a space somehow exempted from politics of the present and the evils of the past.

The wider context

The film, in my view, engages with colonialism as not only something that happened “out there,” that is the film disturbs the persistent notion that colonialism is something that took place outside what we refer to as the “west,” global north or Europe. European identities were deeply shaped by imperialism and colonialism, with ideas of race not only inscribing particular meanings on black bodies but also those identified as white. Imperialism and colonialism also shaped national and gendered identities (Stoller 1992; McClintock 1995).
Importantly, what the film draws attention to is the existence of a world that has been interconnected for a long time.

This is an important intervention in a present when migration from south to north has become a key issue and when discussions are often based upon depictions of “Europe” as a fixed and ahistorical entity that is now under attack due to uprooted and displaced populations from something that exists “outside” of Europe – more specifically North and West Africa.

Europe is thus presented in popular discourse as a natural and bounded space under siege by populations that have nothing to do with it. The long and continued involvement of Europe with Africa – which the film brings out – as well as the continuous importance of colonial legacies in shaping migration patterns in the present, seems completely forgotten in the narratives saturating the present.

Let me briefly comment on broader aspects of this “forgetting” in a Nordic context, which is my more intimate context as a person born and living in Iceland.

Until recently, the Nordic countries were generally not theorized in the context of colonialism and imperialism. This view of the Nordic countries as exempted somehow from colonialism, which Lars Jensen and I have discussed extensively elsewhere (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Loftsdóttir 2015, 2016), arises from ideas of Nordic exceptionalism, which have been a persistent self-image and representation of the Nordic countries.

Consequently, scholarly work focusing on the shaping of Icelandic nationalism positions nationalism in Iceland in relation to national sentiments in other European countries but much less in relation to European colonial and imperialistic identity formations. Paul Gilroy (1993:3) uses the term “cultural insiderism” to capture assumptions that presume national entities are formed within their own spaces rather than being the products of transverse dynamics. This, again, highlights the importance of recognizing imperial and colonial history as a key factor in shaping European identities. We have to ask critically how Nordic countries existed in a world that was characterized by intense brutality and systematic dehumanization of others through narratives, as well as practices and policies.

The Nordic countries had different engagements with colonialism: Denmark, for example, had vast colonial possessions in different parts of the world, while for Iceland the engagement with colonialism was more in terms of accepting and contributing to racist imaginaries of self and other – but these were, however, definite engagements which participated in the inhumanity that colonialism embodies. When we consider that the Nordic countries are often strongly associated with equality and whiteness, this amnesia in terms of colonialism makes it possible to overlook how an idea of the equalitarian Nordic countries is in coherence with a particular ordering of the world into racialized spaces of more and less civilized people.
The past is not only about the past. We have to ask: What is the relationship between this past and the present – between the racism that was part of being European in the age of imperialism and colonialism and current discussions about multiculturalism, refugees and asylum seekers? How do claims of innocence in terms of racism not only in the past but also today link with forgetting about interconnectedness? We have to discuss critically how the forgetting of a shared past affects discussions about racism in the present. This becomes important in the current environment, which is often imagined as post-racist, where the era of racism is conceptualized as having ended, without spilling into the present.

Racism – the Global South legacy

Another critical avenue down which I see Alto Malinda’s work taking us – but which I have no idea if this was her intention – is racism in American and European contexts enacted by the figure in “blackface.” Possibly I am not reading the image correctly, but there is something about the figure of Papa Wata walking at the market, which made me think of this persistent racist depiction of black people within the Global South.

In the film, Papa Wata seems in fact not like an imitation of blackface but more like its inversion – or its opposite – not only in terms of black and white but also in terms of presenting a dignified figure, even a delicate one, instead of a figure with a grotesque face exhibiting clown-like behavior. Papai Wata, as a vague reflection of the blackface figure, moves across the screen silently and somewhat sadly.

In that context, it can be pointed out that mimicry has for a long time been connected with power and colonialism: In some West African countries mimicry of colonial officials within spirit possessions was one form of resistance to colonialization.

The concept “second contact” used by Michael Taussig (1993) came into my mind when thinking about this. The concept refers to the way in which a person sees one’s self as reflected in images produced by others to imitate that person. As argued by Paul Stoller (1994:159) in regard to the West-African Songhay portrayal of white colonial officers in the early 20th century, these images produced by these West-Africans of white officials incorporate both African and European “universes of experience,” and for the Europeans at the time the portrayal provided a disturbing “disruption” of the category of “sober European.” In this sense, the Papa Wata – as showing a shared universe of experience, and the dignified portrayal of a white person – speaks to blackface and thus disrupts and unsettles this presentation. According to Taussig, “second contact” can be perceived as a borderland, where “us” and “other” lose their polarity and their focus is blurred (1993:159). This is interesting also in terms of Mama Wata, as a depiction of a woman from India, made in Germany and then brought to Africa, where she was recognized as resembling an ancient water spirit. Papa Wata, whom we see at the market and whose figure symbolizes the white man, then is not only a black woman representing a white man, but also a cross-reference to how Europeans have historically presented black people in Europe.

Let me just stress at the end that what I find powerful about the work is its ambiguity, the difficulties of reading it. In my view, the film does not speak only against forgetting but also
presents a complicated past where the boundaries that we imagine today did not exist – where people and images were on the move as they are today.

The work investigates on a broader scale not only how the colonial past seeps into the present, but also how it brings a sense of a shared past. How are colonial legacies expressed in Europe in the present and how are different forms of denial or acknowledgement expressed in relation to various issues. This work reminds us that the categories themselves of Africa and Europe are themselves socially invented.

References


*The Many Headed Hydra* is a project by Emma Haugh and Suza Husse at District, Berlin. www.district-berlin.com