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Common heritages: challenges of the "democracy of the future"

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Abstract: The reflections presented in this article were developed within the sphere of the Research Group on Subjectivities and (Auto)Biographies of the Graduate Studies Program in Cultural Heritage and Society at the University of the Region of Joinville (Univille), in (auto)biographical research studies which narrate lives and experiences in conditions of vulnerability. They require profound listening, at the same time as they provoke a type of knowledge production marked by a political position concerning the reality of the present. Based on Safatle's work (2016), about the precariousness of life, our question is: What can the condition of vulnerability of life say about cultural heritages? What does one think starting from helplessness? At first, the articulation between memory concepts developed throughout the 20th century is retrieved, especially in the context of the Holocaust. In a second moment, following Mbembe (2018), the reflection argues in favor of the common heritage and its articulation with the memory of Plantation and the challenge of identity and concepts such as the *in common* to the detriment of *the universal*.

Keywords: memories; common heritage; Holocaust; Plantation.

Resumo: As reflexões apresentadas neste artigo são desenvolvidas no âmbito do Grupo de Pesquisa Subjetividades e (Auto)Biografias, do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Patrimônio Cultural e Sociedade, da Universidade da Região de Joinville (Univille), em pesquisas (auto)biográficas que narram vidas e experiências protagonizadas em condições de vulnerabilidades. Demandam uma escuta profunda, ao mesmo tempo em que provocam um tipo de produção de conhecimento marcado por um posicionamento político diante da realidade do presente. A partir de Safatle (2016), acerca da precariedade da vida, a problematização é sobre o que a condição de vulnerabilidade da vida pode dizer sobre os patrimônios culturais? O que se pensa a partir do desamparo? No primeiro momento é recuperada a articulação entre os conceitos de memória desenvolvidos ao longo do século XX, especialmente no contexto do Holocausto. Em um segundo momento, na esteira de Mbembe (2018), as reflexões argumentam em favor do patrimônio comum e da sua articulação com a memória do *Plantation* e do desafio da identidade e de conceitos como o *em comum* em detrimento do *universal*.

Palavras-chave: memórias; patrimônio em comum; Holocausto; Plantation.

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The expression “democracy of the future” has been pointed out by the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe when he says: “The critique of the present only makes sense if it opens a way to a politics of the future” (MBEMBE, 2018c, p. 24 [free translation]). This article agrees with this proposition and sees the reflections about the common heritages are a powerful instrument to confront the challenges of a “politics of the future”, or the “democracy of the future”.

These reflections were developed within the sphere of the Research Group on Subjectivities and (Auto)Biographies of the Graduate Studies Program in Cultural Heritage and Society at the University of the Region of Joinville (Univille). They involve investigations concerning narratives of memories or life stories that, to a great extent, speak about experiences of helplessness. In different realities and situations, these stories refer to vulnerabilities: life with chronic diseases; women as carers who left their paid work and career in order to take care of sick people in the family; women who were victims of domestic violence; children who were victims of sexual violence; women in Quilombola communities with familial memories of Afro-Brazilian slavery and experiences of a precarious life; refugees and/or immigrants, among others. These are examples of the kind of narratives that involve the subjects of research and require profound listening, at the same time as they provoke a type of knowledge production marked by a political position concerning the present reality.

Over the course of research development, the following question has been often asked: What can the condition of vulnerability say about cultural heritages? What does one think starting from helplessness? The reflections presented here were conceived in this context. First, these questions make us agree with the philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2016) when he writes about helplessness. He says that human affection triggers social bonds, but these bonds are intimately articulated with fear and hope. From this perspective, the author revisits Sigmund Freud to speak about the ontological condition of human life, i.e., being born depending on another person and with no management of the other’s action about this dependency.

Throughout life, while bonds of affection and empowering social relationships are created, this primordial condition of the species is also forgotten. The vulnerabilities in the course of life presented in the narratives of the research subjects – either those related to diseases or to natural catastrophes, or those concerning political and economic conflicts – are narrated as external to the subjects and/or provoked by a third party. Therefore, they are different from the existential human condition. One observes an alienation concerning the affection of helplessness as a condition of precarious life, or, in other words, an oblivion of the primordial memory, of the memory that is formed in life outside the uterus. This separation gives the subject in formation the opening to social bonds or the body memory of a species that shows itself in its nature as a cultural being. The desire to self-narrate and to be listened to is a tool vis-à-vis the demand to rebuild oneself in an identity possible in a group.

If Safatle’s (2016) statement is true, emotion as the fear of helplessness is the partner of hope and may mean servitude in the subjects’ political and affective relationships. On the contrary, based on Freud, the awareness of helplessness as a human condition may also mean potency and emancipation.

Helplessness is not something one fights against, but something that one affirms. Since, at least to Freud, we can make quite different things with helplessness, such as transform it into fear, into social anguish, or start from it to produce a gesture with a strong liberating potential. (SAFATLE, 2016, p. 18).

As far as the previous question is concerned – what can the condition of vulnerability say about cultural heritages? What does one think starting from helplessness? –, Safatle’s (2016) reflection may be an initial clue to answer it. The networks of affection and solidarity or the bonds that are designed by the practices of narrative and listening are vital instruments that reveal everyone’s humanity. They are the opposite of the paralysis of fear. In contexts in which body and soul become commodities, the subjects living in vulnerable conditions are devalued. They are a cheap and sometimes disposable labor force. The fear provoked by the feeling of helplessness, or by depending on others, activates political bonds that are articulated with the absence of responses to the demand of necessity. In this context, the narratives of memory are tools that announce to the other identities, maybe more respectable ones, or more worthy than the ones represented in the condition of vulnerability.

It is nothing new that the human skill of memory, of narrating oneself in time, makes the species different compared to the other animals, but, maybe, in the context of fear, when human rights need to be remembered and defended, it is necessary to point out the obvious: it is language, narratives and listening that make us all human beings. In this lies the defense of stories about oneself, of (auto)narratives, of narratives of memory as common heritages of humankind. It is something that, if denied or neglected, as the other elements of life – water, earth, air, sun –, would lead humanity to collapse.

The reflections proposed here start from this context and the questions that orbit around people’s life stories. However, the clues to the questions presented led to a proposition that unfolds in other questions. The relation between memory and identity articulated with cultural heritage is evident, but when one speaks of this kind of treasure of humankind, of a common heritage of everyone, what type of memory and identity is activated? Why shouldn’t one consider also the common heritage as a cultural heritage like the other ones? What is the need for another name?

The two latter questions will be developed in this article, which is organized as follows: in the first moment, we retrieve the articulation between the concepts of memory developed by thinkers from many different areas of science in the 20th century, especially in the context of the Holocaust context, as cultural heritage and identity. Next, following Mbembe’s (2018c) initial proposition of thinking about a “democracy of the future”, the reflections argue for the common heritage and its articulation with the memory of Plantation and the challenge of identity and of concepts such as the *in common* to the detriment of the *universal*. In this topic, we also point out the critique of the developments of the articulation of the universal key and the particulars in the field of cultural heritage, as well as what they reproduce.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MEMORY AFTER THE HOLOCAUST?

The main contemporary authors who are revisited in the memory studies in general speak mainly inspired or touched, directly or indirectly, by the advent of Second World War. In other words, the studies on memory in the 20th century were marked by experiences of vulnerability and trauma provoked by this episode. The phenomenon of the Holocaust and of the war traumas brought fundamental reflections to the memory studies. Before that, in the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th, in 1896 Henri Bergson published an important work in which he pursued the pure memory, the truth about memory. In the same year, but in another direction, Sigmund Freud investigated the place of memory, the unconscious and the psyche. In a letter written to Fliess that became known as Letter 52, he recorded part of his findings about the signification and, consequently, the operation of memory in the human psyche. Later, in the beginning of the 20th century, in 1914, he

systematized this articulation between signification and memory in the text that became known as “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (FREUD, [?-20]). These two writings precede the studies that are contemporary with the Holocaust, although they are very important for the memory studies, but both are investigations interested in the individual and unconscious element of memory processing.

The rupture of the studies with the phenomenon of the great wars and, especially, the advent of the Holocaust were the social dimension of memory. Maurice Halbwachs, in 1925, made a unique contribution with the book *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* and, 25 years later, with the book *The Collective Memory* (HALBWACHS, 1990), which has become the key to interpreting the topic for many years. On the other hand, and from another perspective, in 1936 Walter Benjamin, in a literary analysis called “The Storyteller” (BENJAMIN, 1994), presents memory as a narrative and, therefore, as an experience. These two scholars deeply influenced what is studied about memory in Brazil. The training of History teachers, for instance, includes both authors in its theoretical base, to a greater or lesser extent: on the one hand, studies are inspired by Halbwachs (1990) diachronically to the ways memory is repeated in the social life of a group; and, on the other hand, there are studies that consider Benjamin (1994) in a synchronic dimension, in the narrative elaboration. Sometimes, studies also ponder about these two dimensions and do not establish differences between them.

What we have had after them – Le Goff (2003), Pollak (1989), Nora (1993), Bosi (2003), Koselleck (2014), Ricoeur (2007), Sarlo (2007) and even Huyssen (2000), Candau (2011) and Hartog (2006), as a few examples of acclaimed authors of memory studies – in different ways recovers the predecessors Halbwachs and Benjamin, or even Bergson and Freud, read on the basis of subsequent studies. Even the authors who are not from Europe or who were in periods closer to the end of the war were affected by it to some degree. The studies produced closer in time and place to the Holocaust, or close to authoritarian governments, like the dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil, have generated what we can call antifascism. This means that the thinking about memory is built in the West and in the present time under the impact of the context of the Holocaust and reflections on it, or the things it provoked: repugnance at the horror of fascism and Nazism and the unconditional defense of human rights.

To some extent, all the named authors have defended the inclusion of the memory of everyone in the social scenario and the common people’s participation in the memory of many different groups: women, workers, homosexuals, blacks, indigenous people, among others. This argument is a commonplace in studies on memory and history. The horror of torture on Jewish bodies and the other differences in the Holocaust context marked trauma in the Western memory studies. In the book *Twilight Memories*, Huyssen (2000) warned about the danger of impressing, based on the Holocaust, a single story on all the other traumatic memories. This point is noteworthy, since the same phenomenon that triggered broader reflections on collective memory may also work as a single formula to think about memory. The globalization of the Holocaust can work as a fake memory, or simply block the perception of specific stories.

It is nothing new that memory feeds other memories and history, and vice versa. A major part of history taught in schools builds a collective memory or intends to construct a collective memory about what we were as Brazil, the West or civilization, and/or about the past by means of which this world is told in the present. When a cultural heritage is defined, for example, a memory concerning what has been agreed upon in relation to memory is silently activated. Little is thought about the memory taught in schools or in cultural heritages. The way that the concept of memory has been historically built, through a trauma, ultimately repeats the logic of the Holocaust or what still spills over from it.

Specially thought of from the narrative experience of trauma, of vulnerability, of the inscription of power on the bodies of the different ones or the minorities, it is the memory of vulnerability, of helplessness that reveals a devastating type of power, and it is in this experience that the cited authors moved forward in the knowledge about memory, especially Koselleck (2014) and Ricoeur (2007), who thought about memory in the limit between life and death, but also all the others who have thought about the inclusion of the memories of all the so-called minorities, like Pollak (1989) and Nora (1993), among others.

Including the memory of all through their differences activates the affirmation of the different identities of the most varied groups. If, on the one hand, a kind of identity retraction takes place, it is equally revealed that there is a universal thought that failed in its function of comprehending a whole. The differences do not cease overflowing nor getting stressed in the identity arrangements. Cultural heritages, as vectors of memory, flirt with this game as they reveal the treasures of a social group or the best things a civilization has created, that are capable of materializing an identity.

WHAT CAN WE KNOW ABOUT MEMORY AFTER PLANTATION?

Achille Mbembe's (2018b) provocations highlight Plantation as another key to interpreting the thinking about memory. How can we think about memory based on Plantation? Mbembe says that “the colonial conquest revealed a potential for violence previously unknown. What one witnesses in World War II is the extension to the ‘civilized’ peoples of Europe of the methods previously reserved for the ‘savages’” (MBEMBE, 2018c, p. 32). He (2018) provokes by thinking about something new based on power over other people's bodies and the way how vulnerability and helplessness may be potencies in the fight for life and for the “democracies of the future”.

Studies on memory and identity have progressed because of the tensions between the differences and the universal thought. They refute the idea of the subjects' essence and deal with the differences in the dimension of culture, of the social and of identifications. However, as they progressed, they have created a certain aversion to what brings us closer or what is common to everyone. Vulnerability, the condition of helplessness and the precariousness of life are something in common, but interpreting them as social depreciation or low prestige is a product of the culture that is historically based on the tension between the universal thought and the differences. The universal thought of the white, heterosexual and Cristian man, who is economically successful and holds an erudition of prestigious cultural goods in contrast to so many other differences, has created a dispute over recognition and a place in the sun. Maybe Mbembe's studies tell us something about another key to another world's logic.

Mbembe (2018a; 2018b) exposes the power of a few over other people's bodies, that is, something like biopower, which decides between people who will live and who will die and which submitted black people in centuries previous to the Holocaust and which later, affected white bodies. Biopower made decisions about black Africans and later about the Jews, and later also about the Romanies, the homosexuals and people with disabilities, among others. “In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state” (MBEMBE, 2018b, p. 18). That puts everyone in the precarious condition of vulnerability. Here we return to Safatle's (2016) suggestion that the helplessness in politics may be used in politics of fear or hope. That is, the racism that was imposed on the bodies of black people, Jews and so many others can also be turned against any other group and make it vulnerable to dominate it by fear.

Mbembe (2018a) proposes “black people” as a category that can be extended to all, i.e., the precarious condition may be indiscriminate. This proposition changes the perspective of the identity arrangements and inverts the logic of difference to similarity. According to him, the current neoliberal context objectifies people. What was allowed and acceptable for black people in Plantation may be everybody’s condition. The idea is to analyze the trade in black people on the level of a phenomenon, as a product of what he calls “the night face of capital”. As a phenomenon, we can think about the black people rather as a category and less as only a phenotypic difference. In the author’s words,

[...] the term “Black” referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin (different forms of depredation, dispossession of all power of self-determination, and, most of all, dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible). Now, for the first time in human history, the term “Black” has been generalized. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalized as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet, is what I call the *Becoming Black of the world* (MBEMBE, 2018a, p. 20 [*Critique of Black Reason*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 5-6]).

People who are in this category, whom the author also calls “living crypts of capital”, are zombies, the living dead. They are the thousands who wake up in the morning, take the subway or are stuck in the city traffic jams, work, consume what they are supposed to, work, come back home, work, sleep, and start all over again. They work to consume, and they consume to work without reflecting; they are men-things. When there are a lot of them, some die because of the violence of the cities, the traffic, and the poor condition of the health care system. It is not important how they die; it is a death without much large social fuss².

Mbembe’s (2018a) problematizations inspire one to think about memory based on the concept of biopower that he finds in Foucault. In his words, sovereignty “is the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is ‘disposable’ and who is not” (MBEMBE, 2018b, p. 41 [free translation]). So, there is a slight disagreement between Mbembe (2018b) and Foucault because the latter deals with the concept of biopolitics and the former chooses to update it and talks about necropolitics, positioning it temporally before the 17th and 18th centuries.

Just as the cited authors, who wrote about memory being contemporary to the Second World War experiences or to the phenomena derived from it, Mbembe was contemporary to the Cameroonian condition of a French colony and to the revolution. He was born in Cameroon when it was still a colony and lived his first 15 years in a state of war, in contact with adults who had memories of the experience of a colony or memories of a racial slavery which lasted centuries, besides the white people’s power relations over black people’s bodies. Maybe this place has brought a different world perception, a vulnerability regarding others in other parts of the planet. However, if the condition of vulnerability is a common point for humanity, what is the difference between thinking about memory based on the Holocaust and Plantation?

This is more about the epistemological perspective based on which we think of these phenomena than about the phenomena per se. In the field of cultural heritage, for example, the narratives of memories are the main argument about the importance of the value of

² At the end of the writing of this text, the world has experienced thousands of deaths because of the COVID-19, as well as the quarantine to stop coronavirus contagion. Some episodes like the Italian advertising “*Milano non si ferma*” and the Brazilian one “Brazil can’t stop” expose the vulgarization of the death of the “living crypts of capital” for the sake of economic health.

goods. Under the criterion of the concept of universality and the tension of competitive differences, exceptionality seems to be the most important value to transform a good into cultural heritage. The group’s memory, to a great extent, attests to the immaterial value of the exceptionality in question, and this exceptionality activates the competitive value of that group or of that difference.

The heritages that are representative vectors of memories of the most different groups, like the Afro-Brazilian Quilombolas, the hundreds of indigenous tribes, the riparian population groups, the Romanies, pardos, women, children, workers, among others, provoke positive identifications within their group and, because of that, are politically important in the identity tensions in the arrangements of the differences and universal forces. Beyond advocating a history of all, for all and built by all, these heritages repeat and reproduce a type of world, a type of democracy in which the logic of functioning is the competition. What we conventionally call universal is something particular to a group that has, in the political game of memory, enough strength to be hegemonic, even though provisionally.

It should be emphasized that there is no mistake in the existence of these different forms of representativeness of memories nor of heritages of minorities and more vulnerable groups. On the contrary, they are politically significant manifestations in the current democracies, but in order to think of “new democracies”, new worlds where the geopolitical boundaries don’t mean the naturalization of differences nor identity competitions. They are forms of the same tension between universal thought and particular thoughts.

When Mbembe (2018a) thinks of the power over the slave’s body in a colonial situation, the tattered body, as a literary reference, or the body that refuses to die, he wants to investigate where the potency of this body is. In other words, Plantation as a phenomenon of the memory of precariousness or helplessness may reveal the awareness of this vulnerability in the context of the neoliberal world, and the “becoming black of the world” may trigger reflections about human potency. That is, using Mbembe’s (2018a) literary metaphors, the potency of bodies that refuse to die, or in Safatle’s (2016, p. 18-19) words,

Freud’s political lesson consists in saying that there is a type of imprisonment of helplessness in the neurotic logic of reparation narratives, expected by those against whom I fight, narratives of demand for care, or, if you want to use a word that tends to submit the political field, caring. Taking the helplessness out of this prison is the first condition for our emancipation.

The emancipation that Safatle (2016) advocates based on Freud dialogues with Mbembe (2018a) when the latter defends a work for life that consists in being careful to escape the human objectification produced in the competitive game of and for consumption. In his words, “The *work for life* consists in sparing the body from degenerating into absolute thingness, in preventing the body from becoming a simple object” (MBEMBE, 2018a, p. 251). Thinking about black people as a social analysis category highlights the ontological condition of the precarious human life, and the values of the “in common” to the detriment of the universal become the defense of life itself.

Mbembe (2018c) suggests thinking about a “democracy of the future” based on a clear distinction between the universal and the “in common”. It is not a fascist common, that hegemonizes things and people, but the differences that share a point in common. Plantation as a memory of precarity as a condition or a place of ontological helplessness that may inspire the decision about the values that really matter in the fight against the objectification of life. In this direction, humankind’s common heritages – water, earth, biodiversity, the right to the sun, the languages, the narratives, the listening – are instruments that are vectors of memories of the potency of life itself. What kind of memory can be activated to

feed this sense of “in common”? Maybe this is the greatest challenge of the “democracy of the future”, a world whose memory of its potency is also the memory of its vulnerability.

In the cultural heritage field, i.e., under the logic of the concept of universal ideas and competitive differences, the attempts at including biodiversity and languages in the list of treasures of humanity are not new. The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972 of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) already provided for an international regulatory framework that considered the environment and immaterial culture. Protecting biodiversity was a response to the threats of men against nature, but the concept of this heritage was based on the universal metrics of European culture. The rupture occurred later, in 1985, with the Declaration of Mexico, which included in culture the spiritual and affective immateriality, as well as the anonymous creations of the popular soul and the values that give meaning to life.

The documents subsequent to this decision already contain an agreement on the idea that the popular traditions that are expressions of groups or individuals are part of identities and cultures. The broadening of cultural heritage occurred in the context of the effective participation of southern countries in the group of decisions of supranational institutions, like UNESCO and the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

However, the recommendations on the protection of this immaterial heritage are fragile vis-à-vis the political structure of management built based on the material heritage. Here there is a clear competitive tension between the universal idea of erudite culture, expressed in the architectural, artistic, historical etc. heritages, and the idea of popular culture of less developed civilizations, expressed in eccentricities of colors, dance and the less recognized rituals. This inclusion did not solve the problem of the logic of competitive dispute. Yet, in this process one should emphasize the effect of the mobilization of the countries of the Southern bloc, emerging countries situated in South America, Africa, and Asia, which had a relation with their traditional practices that was different from European societies.

This fact didn't break the competitive logic of the exceptionality of cultural heritage but revealed an enigma in the field, viz the impossibility of representing the immaterialities of heritage. It highlighted the recognition of rituals and languages of groups that “refuse to die”, as the literary metaphor used by Mbembe (2018a) says. Maybe there exists in the immaterial rituals like the indigenous circle, the songs and the stories of riparian population groups, the African drums, the communal sharing by slum communities some memory beyond helplessness, but rather of affective generosity, memories of human potency of very diverse languages. What can be explored in the heritage education of these traditions and rituals that might work beyond the same competitive history of exceptionality? Maybe it is necessary to ask what type of social corporeality can be produced with the circles of affects founded on helplessness. There is a becoming in the circles, the songs, the sharing, the energies exchanged in these immaterial heritages that cannot be materially recorded, but that deserve attention concerning the dispossession they create. A body in dispossession also dis-identifies its universal determinations. Contingencies disorganize normativities and produce, as advocated by Safatle (2016), “*corpus* in wandering”, incapable of stabilization in some inscription of totality or supposed universality. In other words, this is a favorable condition to prioritize the “in common”, while the universal laws lose their power of social stability.

The common heritages belong to the bodies open to their own spectrality. They are not in the same competitive logic as cultural heritages; they are, rather, the criticism of that in which they failed. UNESCO's objective of confronting wars and promoting world peace find an obstacle when it uses the same competitive logic of exceptionality produced in the tension between the universal and the particulars. The challenge of a “new democracy”, as

proposed by Mbembe (2018c), is to abdicate from this key to the world. The idea is to open new ways with another key, something whose first step is the recognition of the condition of precarious life, which the author suggests dealing with as the “becoming black of the world”. Life and the priorities of the “in common” are thought of based on this fragility, the potency of life revealed with no abdicating from differences, but paying attention to the “in common”. It is not the one oriented to the domination of the others’ bodies, but to the languages that connect, that welcome, that strengthen generosity, that make live. The defense of common heritages is synonymous with the defense of life, with the refusal of objectification. It is micro-politics, resistance, counterculture. Maybe the “democracy of the future” that Mbembe tells us about (2018c) is also a result of the affirmation of the memory of helplessness as a place of potency and of the affective achievements of micro-relations in defense of common heritages.

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