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Whose West and Whose Universal? Ana Teixeira Pinto in conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska

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A conversation with Ana Teixeira Pinto, a co-curator of "The White West", a series of conferences, podcasts, publications and interventions.

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Katarzyna Bojarska - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of Widok. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Receipient of numerous research grants and awards, including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

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Katarzyna Bojarska: *The White West*, the project you co-organize with Kader Attia, began in 2018 with a conference—*The White West. La résurgence du fascisme comme force culturelle*—but what was the actual beginning? How did it come into being? What triggered the project and what inspired you in particular (and I mean from both outside reality and readings or images)?

Ana Teixeira Pinto: At the time we—myself, Kader Attia and Giovanna Zapperi—were alarmed by the role contemporary art was playing in the dissemination of neo fascist idioms. On the one hand, the style people refer to as post internet had been popularizing visual tropes connoted with the alt-right; on the other hand, the artworld's enthusiasm for "accelerationism" was leading students down the rabbit hole of far-right radicalization...

KB: Would you be willing to give an example or two here?

ATP: I am reluctant to do that, as I don't want to individuate this problem. People love to go "nazi-hunting" but this is not about a handful of artists with questionable politics. The contemporary art milieu is vulnerable to far-right entryism because it cultivates a certain persona, the *contrarian*, and an attitude of jaded cynicism that renders aesthetic experience a direct extension of moral outrage. The typical post-internet shtick, was to flirt with far-right idioms and tropes ironically, in order to claim plausible deniability while monetizing shock-value. This grew out of the implicitly adversarial or antagonistic positions that were popular in the 90's and 00's, I am here thinking of artists like Santiago Sierra who recently had his blood-soaked flag artwork canceled by the Dark Mofo festival, after an outcry about his call for aboriginal blood. If you think commissioning a Spanish guy to soak a British flag in the blood of

native Tasmanians is a thought-provoking artwork you probably think peppering your communication materials with Pepe memes, like the 6th Athens Biennial did, is edgy or boundary-pushing. It's always the same routine: you traffic in the idiom of oppression while claiming to subtract from what you are, in fact, adding to.

But as I said, this is a structural question that goes beyond a handful of bad boys. Contemporary art audiences have been trained to recognize affirmation as a critical gesture ever since Pop Art was marketed as a significant conceptual turn. Its conventions of plasticity—like appropriation, over-identification or pastiche—by virtue of their ambivalent nature, can play two dissonant registers at once, hence they have a use-value for the alt-right. Vaporwave, for instance, began as a form of postmodern pastiche, later spawning two white ethno-nationalist subgenres: fashwave and Trumpwave. By drawing heavily from Vaporwave, post-internet naturalized its chauvinistic mix of Greco-Roman marbles with Tron-like grids, pastel colors and palm trees, tying the mythical origin of white civilization to the American Dream and the joyful promises of the early internet years.

Of additional concern to us, in the run-up to the Trump election, was the popularization of "accelerationism," by contemporary art institutions, and by extension of Nick Land and a bevy of other tech bros/crypto white supremacists. This in effect functioned as a gateway to the far right. The term accelerationism has since featured in several white-supremacist manifestoes, but at the time its political content was obscured by calls for a "left-wing accelerationism." To me this is the like championing "pro-life feminism," but more to the point, it illuminates the dangers of a partial or distorted critique of capitalism, whose structural inconsistencies allow for a slide toward fascism. This was our initial objective and the reason we organized the first conference, to counter this far-right creep.

KB: What is the "white west" that you are analyzing and how have you envisioned the analysis?

ATP: There is a long tradition of scholarship that ties fascism to irrationalism, or to personal pathology, because in the immediate aftermath of World War II, as Mahmood Mamdani details in *Neither Settler nor Native*, the Allies reconceptualized Nazism as "an accumulation of individual crimes rather than a political project."[1] But fascism is not just an outburst of hatred, and it is not irrational either. Fascism is a structural aspect of modernity. The modern nation state, as Mamdani argues, was born in 1492, when the Castilian monarchy sought to establish a Christian polity by expelling Moors and Jews. That same year Columbus chanced upon the Americas. Nationalism, and colonialism were co-constituted and, from this perspective, the West is less an engine of modernization than of plunder and ethnic cleansing.[2]

The White West is an attempt to analyze white supremacy as a political system, rather than as a cultural pathology. We felt this change of perspective was needed because we were repeatedly told off for "not using the word fascism in an accurate manner."



KB: Is there one?

ATP: Indeed! Fascism is syncretic. There is no point in getting bogged down in discussions about whether Trump is a fascist. To us it was more important to rethink fascism, departing from the post war distortions put in place to shield the victors from scrutiny by obscuring the continuities between their own

colonial genocides and fascism. White supremacy, as Charles W. Mills argues, is never "seen as a political system," it is just the backdrop against which "other systems, which we are to see as political," (like social democracy or fascism) play out.[3] But rather than the absolute opposite of totalitarianism, social democracy can, and does, accommodate a totalitarian dimension, differentiating between those whom the law protects but does not bind and those whom the law binds but does not protect, those who are besieged by state or state sanctioned terror, targeted by racial oppression at home and by colonial violence abroad. Because this history is under-theorized we felt the need to illuminate the nexus between fascism and settler colonialism, hence *The White West* conference, which developed into a podcast series.

KB: You diagnosed "the growing disaffection for democracy" expressed on the one hand by anti-system sentiments, and on the other by overt racism and misogyny, how would you say a reflection and action from within contemporary art can counter these forces? What emotions and disaffections is fascism fed on, nowadays in particular? And what visual languages can speak to this situation?

ATP: I think it's clear to everyone today that capitalism is over, not as an actual economic system but as a way of organizing life, affectively as well as materially. Upward mobility was a big selling point for capitalism because it provided an answer to the question of class or caste. You could, in theory at least, improve your lot. Obviously, a great deal of effort (and violence) was put into nudging people to move up the social ladder one at the time, you could rise from your class but not with it... That said, even if never fully solvent, the American dream was a powerful pull.



L'après-vie du fascisme / The afterlife of fascism
The White West 2

What happens when aspirations for upward mobility, job security, social parity, or even the durable intimacy that went hand in hand with these, start to crumble under the weight of precarity? In Europe, for instance, it is very clear that the political class's answer to the unraveling of the EU, undone by the Greek debt crisis, is Islamophobia and the revival of virulent forms of racism. In a crucial rhetorical operation, often repeated, fascism displaces the Marxist concept of alienation—the alienation of land into property, for instance, which expropriates peasants and the indigenous—to foreground a different form of alienation, alienation from the authentic, the native or traditional way of life. In other words, fascism is an antipolitical ideology that displaces the question of property to foreground the question of truth and authenticity. Fascism is, in a way, an attempt to re-fetishize social relations (hence the charismatic leader or the attachment to normative gender roles) but this is also the reason why fascism splits capitalism into abstract and concrete forms, demonizing the former while lionizing the latter.

KB: Is this the reason, you think, why it has emerged in Eastern Europe?

ATP: Yes, in part it helps to explain why fascism became such a political force in Eastern Europe: the demise of the Soviet era coincided with the turn towards financialization. Financialization is hard to grasp, and, as Moishe Postone argued, for modern anti-Semitism the figure of the Jew is the embodiment of financial abstraction, the concrete name that can be given to these abstract powers, a p e r s o n i f i e d form of social relation, if you will.[4] Now I said fascism lionizes concrete forms of capital, in the 1930's this meant industry, but now it's actually—and a bit oddly—digital tech that occupies that place. Bitcoin, for instance, reflects deep-seated anxieties about "foreign" control of currency, and more broadly, an anti-Semitic creep marked by the putative illegitimacy or unnaturalness of financial capital. To return to your first question: we are living through dangerous

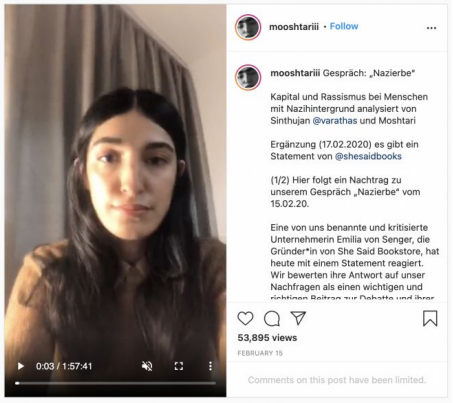
times because the disaffection with neoliberalism and the growing distrust of social democracy opens up an ambiguous space, in which a critique of capitalism can take on a fascist form.

KB: And how could art contribute to the decolonial project you are thinking of, or how is it contributing?

ATP: Contemporary art cannot counter these forces; it does not scale up. We need political mobilization. Besides the contemporary artworld can and does operate politically in ways that run counter to the political aspirations of most artists. By promoting financial speculation, by providing a liberal mask to repressive regimes, by promoting gentrification, by monetizing the culture of indigenous peoples whose lands are simultaneously being appropriated, by flattering wealth, by affirming capital. And yet artists are able to absorb all these contradictions and remain attached to a way of world making whose ceremonies and protocols are at best bankrupt and vacuous and at worse complicit in the perpetuation of economic violence and the monstrous, messy, and ruinous social forms this violence engenders.

KB: Are you saying there is no room for political action on artists' part?

ATP: No, a lot of artists are acting politically, but the way the contemporary art world is structured is an impediment, not an advantage. This is why Kader felt the need to start a new space, La Colonie, now sadly shut. But there's a lot of people doing a lot with very little.



I just came across a very compelling analysis of dynastic power, inherited wealth, and pink-washing of Prussian militaristic histories by Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah. They coined the expression "Germans with a Nazi background" to refer to collectors or heirs whose wealth was accumulated during the Nazi period. The German press reacted in the most unhinged manner because they called out a queer-feminist bookshop owner who said theirs was a "safe space," but it's a legitimate question, how safe, and for whom, can such a space be? There is a structural contradiction if one decries oppression while enjoying its fruits, enjoying the wealth it engendered. To me this touched on a crucial point cause its not about singling out this one person but diagnosing the problem with the "denazification process" in the postwar, which did not touch on questions of property. The other interesting aspect to this story is that you can see how social media democratized critique. Some years ago you'd write an article about it, after an exhausting editorial process you'd get some watered-down version published only to be marginalized and black listed from contemporary art platforms. Now you get to bypass the gatekeepers and intervene directly in cultural politics… no wonder, of late, contemporary art publications—I am thinking for instance of *Spike* or *Arts of the Working Class* are devoting entire issues to attacking what they call "cancel culture," or "moralism," while advocating for "freedom of speech" and "artistic freedom." In a way they are just defending their business model, predicated on aspirational nihilism, but they are also getting in bed with the far right, and it is this odd bedfellowism that I find most worrisome, how a reactionary position is cohering around these talking points whose purpose is the exact

opposite of what they claim: to stamp out challenging voices and restore the hegemony of anti-political discourse.

KB: You intimated that without the will to confront the role of race in the production and reproduction of global wealth, the question of the "good life" can only be raised in distorted form. Could you please elaborate on this?

ATP: I think the biggest political challenge today is to build a decolonial left in Europe and North America. I say this because elements of both the left and the right are cohering around terms like “cancel culture,” and there is a new reactionary front, that cuts across these divisions, insisting on a chauvinistic script. Welfare chauvinism plays a big role here, but also programs like Universal Basic Income for instance, which are very popular at the moment, and don’t address the question of income inequality or progressive taxation, they simply formalize an already existing, albeit informal, social division between those who own the increasingly privatized social resources and those who must pay for access to those resources. Most likely a program like UBI would simply provide another subsidy to landlords, as it would certainly lead to an increase in housing costs, but most importantly these types of programs don’t address the persistence of colonial and neo-colonial formations in geopolitics and would ultimately lead to a further intensification of border regimes. I do recognize that it is difficult to discuss white privilege when people are hurting financially, but there is a huge difference between being exploited and being expropriated. Most people are hurting, and there is an interlocutory dimension to pain, but there is also a systemic dimension, white people’s hurt is not tied to their race. If you are a woman, if you are gender non-conforming, if you are a member of a racialized minority, your pain is social in origin, you will suffer under a system that thwarts your every move, which is not to say this pain is equally distributed either, black people bear the brunt of it.

KB: What exactly do you have in mind to redress this?

ATP: There is racial ordering of life's outcomes and race has a structuring effect in geopolitics. Millions are transferred annually from Africa to Europe on visa applications alone. The Western colonial powers never offered plundered African nations nor enslaved Africans or their descendants any form of restitution. Instead, Britain paid reparations to white slave owners (British taxpayers paid compensations to slave holding families until 2015, this means that the descendants of the enslaved, who themselves never got compensated, contributed to the further enrichment of former slave owners) and France forced Haiti, after its successful insurrection, to pay the modern equivalent of 21 billion USD as compensation for lost revenues, an amount whose interest the island nation kept paying until as recently as 1947. Whilst Emmanuel Macron vowed to repatriate looted African artefacts there is no public debate over the CFA franc, created at the end of World War II, which keeps France's former African colonies in a neocolonial economic stranglehold. If you are perched on top of such steep wealth differentials, as Europeans are, you can either fight for a decolonial project or invest in security, fortify the border, militarize the police, wage inner wars against ghettoized minorities. The net effect is that social democracy becomes ever more strained and constrained form. That's what I mean by distorted form.



KB: The subtitle of the last part of the project (in collaboration with Anselm Franke of HKW) is the question "whose universal?"; what motivated the shift from fascism-apartheid-necropolitics to the question of the universal, and how did it work?

ATP: It is easy to call out explicit racism but prejudice is often expressed in the language of principle. Thus principles, as Donald

Kinder and Tali Mendelberg argue, are best understood in how they are 'put to use', how they are employed and for what ends[5]. The term 'identity politics' is often used to deride decolonial critique as 'divisive,' as a form of political tribalism, or an explosion of particular or insular claims that hinder political solidarity. But universal values are, in most European countries, code for islamophobia.

KB: Do you have anything specific in mind?

ATP: You only have to look at the current debate in France: the minister for higher education declared her intent to request an investigation of 'islamo-leftism,' criticizing "radical" academics for always "looking at everything through the prism of their will to divide." Needless to say, mounting pressures, coming from those that had hitherto been kept silent, disturb the supposed universalist values of European nation states. And oftentimes, appeals for "solidarity" are just attempts to ensure white futurity, to re-center white identity or to restore whiteness to the centre of the symbolic matrix. This is why we felt it would be worth asking "whose universal?" are we talking about when we champion universal values.

This is a political question as well as an epistemological one. If you look at Bergson's 1932 essay *Les deux sources de la morale et la religion* [The Two Sources of Morality and Religion] you can see that the dichotomy between the open and the closed systems is a racial schema, opposing the tribal and primitive who are resistant to progress to those who embrace it. Bergson describes two fundamentally different types of societies, the open (dynamic) and the closed (static).[6] Whereas closed societies are intolerant of otherness, open societies are tolerant and universalist. The problem is not only that Bergson's conceptualization of open systems has tuned with the development of a globally integrated economy but also that, underlying the geographical orders imposed by colonialism, as Alia Al-Saji notes, are temporal frameworks or economies of time

that persist largely unquestioned. And the chronopolitical expression of these economies of time is saturated by colonial formations.

KB: What do we need to question then?

ATP: An examination of the extent to which metaphysical predicates are entangled in these colonial formations: If anything defined the modern era, it was the belief that the future would be different from the past. But this articulation of difference hinges on, and intersects with, another articulation of difference: racial difference. Whereas the modern revolutions claim to have eliminated distinctions of class, caste rank or status, they tacitly accept the concept of racial difference, an imminently modern construct. Race, as Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, makes plain, indexes a preoccupation with history, progress and forward-moving processes to differences of skin color, and differentiates human beings along scales of development. All the markers of modernity—progress, development, modernization, industrialization, urbanization—suggest a comparative chronology. Developing in tandem with, and against the backdrop of colonialism, these schemas exonerate and rationalize the power asymmetries they themselves engender, by ascribing different populations to different temporalities.
This "denial of coevalness," anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues,[7] ultimately consigns colonized subjects to the waiting room of history, and because the non-Europeans are hopelessly "behind the times" successive waves of colonial and neo-colonial depredation are, to this day, justified by the necessity to assimilate to modernity, to develop, or to "catch up" if you will. Theft, or that which is taken—via enslavement, land-grabs, depredation or plunder—can be thus codified as a gift, as the dispensation of contemporaneity.

From this perspective, universalism crowds out others; it becomes a biopolitical and, by extension, necropolitical instrument: the distribution of time becomes the distribution of territory, and hence the distribution of life.

KB: So, is your project over or do you plan any more conferences, publications?

ATP: Yes, we will continue to upload our podcasts and the HKW conference will take place in July 9 to 11, we are also planning to publish two volumes of *The White West* series with Sternberg Press. We might do another conference next year but I cannot confirm this yet, sadly it does not seem these issues are losing a sense of urgency...

1 Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

2 Ibid.

3 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

4 Moishe Postone, "The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century," in *Catastrophe and Meaning,* eds. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 133.

5 See Donald R. Kinder, Tali Mendelberg, "Cracks in American Apartheid: The Political Impact of Prejudice among Desegregated Whites", The Journal of Politics no. 2, vol. 57 (May 1995), 402-424.

6 See Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

7 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).