



MARGINAL BLUES

Lucas Odahara
in conversation with Espace 3353

Where does the title *Marginal Blues* come from?

Marginal Blues actually comes from the name of the blue glaze I used in the paintings for this work – *Ränderblau* (which translates to marginal blue). I only paid attention to it after the paintings were finished, but once the work was there, it really spoke to me not only as a color, but as a space I was inhabiting in the making of the work, when trying to listen to the unspoken aspects of the novel *Bom-Crioulo*, by Adolfo Caminha. So *Marginal Blues* started to become for me the idea of a space (maybe even a sonic space – like the Blues as a musical genre), outside of historical thought, where I could rethink my relationship with an idea of *kuir* memory. This work is about a search. A search for voices, bodies, stories, ancestry, that are not easily within reach, as they are stories of peoples from the margins. The margins of history, of photographs, documents, of freedom, and of land itself.

In the specific case of the book I worked with, which looks at the life of a gay, former enslaved man in Rio de Janeiro at the end of 19th century, who searched for freedom in the sea and in the blue eyes of another navy man, the *Marginal Blues* seemed to be the right space for this encounter.

In 2017, you presented the installation *Os sons deles ecoando entre eu e você* [Their sounds echoing between you and me] at the Schwulesmuseum in Berlin. You describe this work as a first step into a longer research, that unfolds into different chapters and forms over years.

Exactly, this work started as a commission for the exhibition *Odarodle – An imaginary their_story of naturepeoples, 1535-2017*, curated by Ashkan Sepahvand in 2017 at the Schwulesmuseum* in Berlin. It was a long process of working closely with Ashkan in the making of the work, and I'm very grateful for that time. The Schwulesmuseum* has the largest collection of LGBTIQ* documents and items in Germany, and the work started in fact from a booklet we found in the archive. The document tells the story of Tibira do Maranhão, which is based on the travel journal of a French priest called Yves d'Évreux, written when he was in the north of Brazil, at the time the French were trying to establish a colony in the region. According to a section of the journal, a Tupinambá man (named Tibira in the booklet) was murdered for not conforming to French gender mores. The scene is described by the priest in a very allegoric way, as the representation of the salvation of one's soul through baptism. He describes his execution by being tied to a cannon; his baptism and wish for tobacco before the murder; his body being split in two. The scene's description is already so terribly violent, and is even increased by the fact that Tibira had no voice in its telling. So when thinking about this story, I had the feeling that his body was part of a kind of common *kuir* ancestry, but at the same time I had no traditional access to him, that is, I couldn't access the memory of him through his writing, images or any usual Western mode of historical thinking. So the work developed as a search for ways to listen to this space that almost do not reverberate in history. How to evoke this space? For that piece, I worked with a variety of people – a sound engineer who helped me recreate the sound of French cannons of the time and with an ornithologist who provided me with recordings of birds from the region in which Tibira died. I spoke to other artists who contributed texts and ways of imagining this story, I looked at landscape paintings of Brazil from that time and region but focusing on the details relating to the region's flora, or at details of indigenous peoples' body parts portrayed by European painting expeditions. It was clear for me that it was unavoidable to work with material produced by the systems of power of the time, meaning texts and images from the colonisers. But is it possible to enter the scene from this kind of material and to shift it, to make space, to listen to its undertones? That was the process of this piece. The work then manifested as a reconfigurable composition of these fragments. I decided to focus on the impossibility of fixing the image of Tibira as a strength rather than a problem. So it is not about filling the gaps of history, but about showing

the unfixable problems of historical thought and evoking an idea of memory instead. So it's more intimate, personal and based on affection.

The exhibition at Espace 3353 constitutes what could be considered a second chapter of this wider research mentioned in your question. And to which I apply the same ideas of listening and memory, but now to the story of *Bom-Crioulo*, and the gay scene in Rio de Janeiro in the late 19th century. So for me the piece is the creation of a space for this kind of idea of ancestry that goes beyond reproduction. It's a space to connect to bodies that I see as precursors, advisors, even lovers! So it's an ever-growing, yet never complete archive of *kuir* memory.

In the series, the materials and techniques (painted ceramic tiles, wooden panels, the use of fragmentation) are similar, with formal and aesthetic variations. Could you speak about the recurring elements and gestures that are deployed in the different chapters?

Both chapters of this series consist of a collection of paintings on tiled panels, all in the same format, arranged on a wooden structure designed in a way that allows for different compositions, creating the possibility of the construction of different images. The history of tile painting is one that interests me a lot. This history is full of displacement and violence, and it follows colonialism, mercantile exchange, capital, so it's a very loaded tradition. At the same time, it connects different histories and geographies through the exchange of historical imagery. With this in mind, I'm interested in the potential that tiling has in rearranging images. So, is it possible to use this technique not as the perpetuator of narratives but as a tool for thinking their undoing, or even exposing their inherent incompleteness? That's the kind of question I have been interested in when working with ceramic tiles.

For the sound piece, you worked in collaboration with sound artist / researcher Pedro Oliveira.

I have collaborated with Pedro Oliveira now for a few years and we have worked on different projects together. For me, sound plays an important role in thinking time, memory and ancestry and the collaboration with Pedro has always helped me to think in these terms. So even though I usually start from visual or written language, I think of the work very often in sonic structures. For the work *Marginal Blues*, this mode of thinking the panels has been so present that I felt like this sound element needed to be as present as the visual, cohabiting the space on the same level. This got even clearer when, during the research, I encountered the first sound recordings made in Brazil, which took place around the same time during which the novel was written. I think this is a very important aspect for understanding that period of time. The development of sound recording is foremost the creation of silence – of the category of the not-recorded, not-archived, not-part of the historical project. There's something inherently violent in the way that recordings started, which I believe resonates a lot with that period in time. It's the idea of 'capturing' something, just like photography did and also Naturalist literature. And again, all of this at the moment of transition to the republic, modernism, and the abolition of slavery.. So I contacted Pedro early on to speak about this specific time in the history of Brazil and we started looking at those early recordings. We decided to work on the sound piece in the same method of the visual research with the photographic archives and its fragmentation.

So we worked with the first recorded song in Brazil, whose refrain goes 'Isso é bom que dói', meaning "This is so good it hurts". We felt like the ambiguity of the beginnings of sound recording in the country couldn't be better described. Pedro played the piano solo in the original song and made a 80-minute performance with a synthesiser, stretching this sound, opening the sonic space of the song, searching for these historical undertones. The image

we used to describe and talk about the creation of this space was the image of the sea and sky confounding in darkness, so there is movement, but also stillness, a sense of water but no visibility and most of all the idea of inseparability. After creating this space, we placed fragments of a poem I wrote, together with fragments of the first sound recordings, dispersed in this amorphous zone.

In that sense, the installation recreates a cinematic space, articulating sound and image to trigger the imaginary of a time and place by depicting it from a re-actualized frame. Would you imagine this use of the cinematic as a way to revisibilize histories?

That's very interesting! I think I never thought of this series in a cinematic way. But maybe one can think of the moveable panels on the floor structure as a literal moving image. The question of how to think of a time and space that has no image is one that has always been present with this work. But I think that the approach to this question diverged from making something or someone visible to making the impossibility of seeing as the centre of the question. So when thinking of Tibira do Maranhão, or Amaro and Aleixo or the gay scene in Rio in the early 20th century, I'm not interested in making them visible, as I feel like this kind of yearning for historical visibility just feeds the same system that discarded their bodies in the first place. The idea here is to evoke them in a new space, outside of history, in a more personal space, where my body meets theirs and I create my own sense of ancestry. In a space of what's been cast out. I think the best way so far that I've found of describing this space, which governed my thinking in this process of making, is this poem I wrote, which is also part of the sound piece, but in Portuguese:

**In a very dark night
walk along the ocean
throw your sight from the beginning of the sea
in direction to the sky.
When the sea disappears
leaving your sight stranded
in a beginningless sky
look away in the direction of the water.
You'd have crossed at least twice
where sea and sky confound.**

***Bom-Crioulo* is a novel by the Brazilian writer Adolfo Caminha, published in 1895. When did you first encounter this book and what importance does it hold in Brazilian literature, then and today?**

Honestly, I only learned about the existence of this novel last year, when I was in São Paulo, and it was my partner, who was in Brazil for the first time (and is very interested in queer literature), who introduced me to the book. We found it in a used book shop close to my parent's house and started reading it. The novel is seen as an important book in the history of homosexuality in Brazil, mostly because it is the first published novel with a main gay character. A lot of its fame is also due to the time it was written and the disturbance it caused in society and the literary circle at the time. The book was translated to a lot of different languages and it was just reprinted in Brazil last year, as a book that serves as a good example of Naturalist literature and of the representation of society in Rio at the end of the 19th century. So it is known within literary movements and queer Brazilian history. I was very shocked with the book, as complex as it is, but the reason it really entered my work was the realization that it was really hard to find other documents or evidence of cuir life in Rio at the time the book was written. And this just further evidences the problematics of historical thinking, which can only provide the voice of someone in a social position of power like Adolfo Caminha, a white straight man, even when talking about the history of homosexuality in Brazil. The inability of the historical mechanism to deal with certain notions of memory is made so obvious with this book that it became the starting point for *Marginal Blues*.

The figure of the sailor as the main character evokes the sailor as an outcast, representing the margins: living at sea, in no specific place, literally off the ground, off the stability of the soil, in something that is always liquid and changing and at times threatening, turbulent and uncontrollable.

Yes, exactly. This space of instability and openness that the sea evokes is very important in the book. In fact the book is clearly divided in two parts. The first part happens on the sea, when Amaro and Aleixo meet, fall in love, have sex for the first time, and make plans for the future. And following that is the second part, on land, when they find an apartment together, Aleixo meets a woman, and things start to dissolve between them. This stark difference between life on the sea and on land is striking to me, especially the multi-faceted idea of water that you described. For this work I decided to focus on the water part, which felt like the right space for positioning myself in this story – a space of uncertainty. There is this one image described in the book that was very important for me when thinking about it. In one of the last scenes that happens in the sea, the author describes a storm:

The sky had grown completely dark, and the gale picked up and began to whistle sinisterly through the rigging, with the extraordinary strength of an invisible giant. Sea and sky ran together in the darkness, forming a single element of blackness around the corvette, enclosing it in all directions, as if everything in it were fated to disappear under the weight of water and clouds...

This for me is so strong. When the limits of sea and sky merge into a single element and create this impossible space. And it is actually the first moment in the book where I felt like the author, unknowingly, finally grasped a real sense of *kuirness* in these characters' lives. Adolfo Caminha was a white straight man, but was also a navy man. His description of the storm suggests a kind of threat and instability that he surely experienced in person, and which I can relate to the uncertainty that we *kuir* people face when looking at our ancestry, or the desires that we experience without preexisting points of reference, or the threat we may face on the streets. I like how these different experiences come together in the image of the dark sea. This specific space that he describes of sea and sky running together in darkness for me

describes a space without time or separability. Where historical mechanisms of sequencing time lose their power and where a *kuir* process of memory can exist. Where my body in 2020 can exist together with the body of fictional characters from 1895, bonded by desire and a shared dismissal of history. That was the space I had in mind for this work, and it was also the reference image to develop the sound piece together with Pedro Oliveira.

The character of *Bom-Crioulo* and his life path raise one specific question: *how is freedom exercised?* Freedom is expressed in so many ways through this character; as a sailor living at sea, as a Black man breaking free from slavery, as a gay man through his lovelife and sexuality, as a “strong” man with a body that frees him from pain and fear of others... However, his freedom is threatened by these same parameters; the boat becomes a prison, his skin color confronts him with racism, his love affair with Aleixo drives him mad and his body makes him sick.

We can think again in terms of this dichotomy between sea and land. Land at the time meant an extremely homophobic society, where *kuir* people would be restricted to working with prostitution or entertainment only, and then only if they could hide behind gender mores. They were constantly on the verge of falling out of the privileges of social life. And at the same time, slavery was being abolished on paper but no social plan was formulated. Enslaved black people were now free from the land they worked but also free of any property, security or social place outside slavery. I'm very interested in the Rio de Janeiro at the time, a capital that was including more and more marginalised people in a new political system – at the turning point between the idea of a tropical monarchy to an idea of a tropical modernity (Brazil became a republic in 1889). And I say tropical because that was part of the plan, since the beginning of the Brazilian monarchy. The idea of building a country after the image of a European past with a tropical twist. Palm trees, exotic fruits, docile indigenous peoples, hard working slaves all building a nation together. And now, with the start of the Brazilian Republic, this same structure was shape-shifting but holding onto its same imperial mechanisms. And the exercise of freedom, as you point out, was a selling point for very different peoples to be part of this. That was the case for example also for all the workers from other continents that started to arrive looking for this freedom and that once arriving would become part of Brazil's whitefication agenda as part of the country's dream of European modernity. So you see how the land was a turmoil of new desires and new stratifications of people that would belong or not to the 'new' dreams of the republic.

In that sense, the sea was indeed an opportunity for a lot of people. The navy received an enormous amount of former enslaved men at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. Imagine that, in the precarious context of existing in this new world, as bad as the navy could be, it was still an occupation, one that offered meals and a place to live. It is awful to think that enslaved people who were brought by violence to Brazil via the sea were now returning to the same sea when their labor, their supposed only worth on land, could not be used by the local white supremacy outside of racial dominance. But this is not to say that the navy was a paradise either.. one of the first large and organized black revolts after the abolition started inside the navy in 1918: the Revolt of the Lash. White officers were still in charge in the navy, and corporal punishment against black and mulato crew was a common practice, even though it was already deemed illegal after the abolition. In the book *Bom-Crioulo*, that's in fact how Amaro is first introduced to the narrative – in one of these punishments. The revolt was a mutiny lead by João Candido against the form of slavery practiced within the navy. That is to say that if the problem of racism is not dealt with, it will only shape-shift into other forms, even on the 'open sea'. It would almost be metaphorical, if it hadn't been the dreadful reality of so many people, who were socially and economically marginalised on land, and who looked at the sea as a possible way to opt-out of this. Towards the last margin.

Adolfo Caminha chooses to portray two “unconventional” love stories: the first one between a Black man and a white man (one a former slave and one from the “peninsula”), the second one between an adult woman and a much younger man. How can we imagine the reception of these stories back then, when the book was first published?

At the time the book was written, it got a lot of bad press for being a scandal and against the mores. But we need to bear in mind that Adolfo Caminha is part of a specific literary movement called Naturalism. In Brazil, it started at the end of the 19th century, around the time the book was written, and its premise was the use of literature as a social experiment. So the author would create a space for characters to exist, but their fate would always be determined by their social circumstances. It looked at characters from a very objective point of view by describing them and their environment in an analytical manner. It also brought to the plot scientific trends of the time such as evolutionism and positivism. This kind of literature was used to think about social problems, which hadn't happened previously with Romanticism. I think this is a very important movement to examine in terms of racist or social inequality structures. The first novel in Brazil coming out of this movement is *O Mulato* (mulatto, mixed race). And together with others like *O Cortiço* (The Slum), *A Carne* (The Flesh), it addressed 'bad social contexts', which meant black communities, slums, homosexuality, prostitution. So the topics were indeed new for literature, but the authors were all the same - white straight men that now had the tools, inspired by science, to write about people or communities that had been previously inaccessible to them. So even though Adolfo Caminha is narrating the life of a gay man in Rio, he cannot describe the sex he has. I see it more that he is the one at the margin as an author. Or better yet, at the shore, unable to reach the dark sea. Not even Naturalist literature could provide him with these tools. And this space between the shore, where the archival material and literature is located, and the dark sea is where I believe my work can take form.

The opening scene is somehow so central in the book, and the reader keeps coming back to it. A Black man is being punished in front of a group of white men for unclear reasons that seem to revolve around his sexuality and his skin color. It is a scene about his resistance to accept punishment that introduces the idea of resignation - towards love, injustice or pain - and conveys a critical perspective of Christianity throughout the narrative.

Caminha's book was a direct attack on the navy as an institution. He himself had been part of it, and it was known at the time that he didn't agree with how it was structured, and he was also an abolitionist. So this scene almost denounces what would only happen two decades later with the Revolt of the Lash, where black navy men would stand against this kind of corporal punishment. The scene, though, is obviously more than a critique of the navy, and it is extremely racist. It introduces Amaro to the book as a body in the typical manner of Naturalist literature, almost as a way to first capture the object for the reader and then to release it into the plot. It is a very violent literary gesture, both in ideology and form. That's the reason I didn't want to somehow portray Amaro in any way with the work. It was more a process of searching for him, or others, who existed in history as silenced bodies but walked the same streets that the book describes, navigated the same sea, listened to the same songs. It's about focusing on all the holes that this book creates.

The original title of the book, *Bom-Crioulo* (literally translates to *Good Black*), became *Rue de la Miséricorde* [Street of Mercy] when translated to French in 1996. How do you interpret these different translations that occurred over time and space?

I was also shocked the first time I saw the title in Portuguese, and I remember that because of that, I was ready to find a very racist old book when I started reading it. And even though I still think the book is very racist for a lot of reasons, it's a kind of racism that inhabits a context with which I wasn't fully familiar, and probably never will be, and I think the title is part of that. The translations into other languages have the advantage of re-naming this unfamiliar space, with the particular excuse of the original title not translating well -- as a linguistic question, rather than as a question of time or ideology.

In this sense, thinking of the period in which the book was written as this unfamiliar space, I like the French decision to focus on the name of the street, which is so meaningful in this story. Misericórdia, which could be translated to English as *compassion* or *pity*, speaks so much more about the whole tragedy that Amaro goes through as a whole, without focusing on any chapter in particular. His life as a former enslaved man, as a navy man, a gay man, in the mental hospital, in love, his deception and his murder of his lover. It is also in fact a similar direction that I took with my work, by looking at the spaces that Amaro inhabited, and taking the focus away from his objectified body. On another note, the English translation, in my opinion, is the worst one. They decided to keep the title *Bom-Crioulo*, but added a subtitle to it: *The Black Man and the Cabin Boy*. I think that by trying to explain or contextualise the words in Portuguese, it ended up being doubly racist! I mean, racist again in a different time-space. So the question of translation is always such a vital one when thinking between spaces, times, bodies and I think it should be one that is never closed. Other translations will come. Maybe we'll be able to think of a better title translation to English by the end of the show.

Exhibition *Marginal Blues*

24th of September to 1st of November 2020 at Espace 3353.

Lucas Odahara (1989, São Paulo) lives and works in Berlin. He graduated from the São Paulo State University and the University of Arts in Bremen, where he completed a Master's degree in Visual Arts in 2015. His work and research oscillate between visual arts and writing and addresses the corporeality of language and its space of convolution within history making. It has been presented in numerous institutions in solo and group exhibitions in Germany, Spain, Sweden and Denmark as well as in South Africa and Pakistan. His exhibition at Espace 3353 marks the first presentation of the artist's work in Switzerland.

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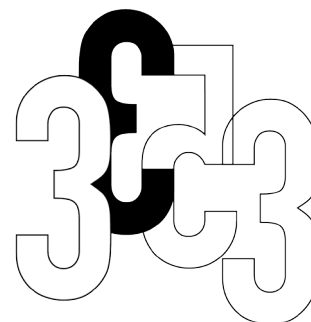
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