

Chapter 7

The Invention of Sophie: Empire, World–Sense, and Art History

ABSTRACT

The figure of Sophie in Mary Sibande’s visual artworks cannot be separated from a reading of ‘empire’. From the logic of empire and art history, the figure of Sophie is the invention of the colonial imaginary foregrounded on Eurocentric authority. Sophie is the outcome of modernity and its colonial logic of erasure that positioned the black body as a colonial subject whose ontology is lost in the figure of a maid. The maid is a political subject who endures colonial authority, and this endurance is limited to the political entanglement that creates her and sees her as a tool. This chapter is a decolonial critique of the figure of Sophie, intending to understand her significance regarding empire and art history. The chapter deploys thematic and conceptual analyses to explore the problems haunting Sophie and is grounded on the hypothesis that the problems haunting the maid reflect many things about modern contemporary society, including its past, present, and future.

INTRODUCTION: ON SOPHIE, THE FIGURE OF THE UNTHOUGHT

Mary Sibande did not invent Sophie. As a South African contemporary visual artist based in Johannesburg, Sibande was only an avatar to create something already there. This is because Sophie existed before Sibande. As such, Sophie’s existence carries evidence of two different worlds coming together. An encounter of modernity and indigeneity, an encounter of the empire and Africa, and the encounter of the black subject and the white subject. Sophie embodies an encounter of two opposite worlds; she represents two worlds that are parallel to each other, two worlds that exist

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within each other. As Sibande's creation, Sophie is a symbol of a ghost from the past that is haunting the present. She is a spirit that does not rest, a spirit that travels with modernity, development, and progress. The figure of the maid is a figure that was invented as a luxury of modernity. She is a symbol of a new form of slavery that is hidden under the notion of domestic services. I do not argue that only black women are maids or servants. However, their existence as subjects/objects can enable new ways of forming decolonial discourse. Through their existence, the critique of the empire, the colonial entanglement of African subjectivity, the house of the madam as an institution of racism, and the presence of the black subject in art history are made possible. As a subject/object, the figure of Sophie represents a subject matter in art history that has been neglected, misread, misrepresented, and depicted as a prop in someone else's narratives, often depicted in passing not as a subject of the formula in their own story but as a prop-subject in the European story of the empire.

In this story of the empire, the figure Sophie represents what Hartman and Wilderson (2003) call the "position of the unthought" as the "property of enjoyment". The position of the unthought and enjoyment comes at the ontological cost of the figure of Sophie, where the madam enjoys the benefits of the maid: the benefits of having a maid come with free time for the madam to do other things considered important in life. Sophie is a figure of the unthought that is not thought of as anything but as a maid. For Sophie, being a maid precedes being a woman, a mother, a wife, a sister, and even a human being. As the colonial history of the world tells us, the world is a patriarchal world in which women are placed last. Hence, the feminists call to destroy patriarchy and gender supremacy. As part of the enjoyment, the madam is then in a position to respond to the feminist call as a free human being who can do and be what they want in life. At the same time, the figure of Sophie is cleaning the house, doing the washing, walking the dog, emptying the garbage bin, going to the shop, cooking and preparing the food, washing the dishes, and sometimes fetching the kids from school. Meanwhile, the madam gets her education, the madam studies art as a hobby, the madam goes to business meetings, the madam goes to the salon, the madam goes jogging, the madam travels, the madam goes on holiday, the madam goes to the gym, the madam attends the children's sports games, music concerts and cultural days at school where black parents do not normally show up because they are cleaning the madam's house.

Examining the figure of Sophie from a decolonial epistemic perspective using Oyewumi's thought allows us to question the institution of domestic work and what is called "African presence" (Van Haute, 2015, p. 20) in Westernised art history of the colonial empire. Under the notion of the African presence, black bodies "are condemned because, under their existential condition of total expropriation, they are driven by something that transcends them: a universal mission" (Mellino, 2013, p. 84) to make whiteness a comfort and zone of luxury. Even if this luxury comes

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