The Aliveness of Moses Quiquine

Andrew Asibong

According to London’s V&A Museum, where the artist took up a fashion residency in the autumn of 2019:

Moses Quiquine seeks to disregard existing boundaries and classifications, whilst maintaining a level of craftsmanship expressing rich detail and visual narrative. Of French-Caribbean descent, Quiquine grew up in London, and is interested in the emotional engagement and tension involved in transforming discarded materials to explore themes of identity, representation and mysticism related to race and culture. Known for meticulous research process, and often inspired by museum collections, he views fashion as a symbolic language, encompassing rich historic references and juxtaposing dialogues within his contemporary archival couture, sculptural fashion, and large-scale tapestries.¹

Having been fortunate enough to witness some of Moses Quiquine’s development as an artist and designer from his late teens into his early twenties, I have observed what I believe to be an important emotional and aesthetic shift in his work, for which I would like in this short article to sketch out a provisional theoretical framework. Drawing on Sándor Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic concept of the post-traumatic ‘splitting’ of the human psyche, together with theories from Haitian vodun regarding the ontological division of the human soul, I suggest that whilst Quiquine’s work seems consistently preoccupied with psycho-spiritual fragmentation under pressure, it is nevertheless reaching out towards increasingly transcendent representational structures through which to explore this preoccupation.

In early projects, Quiquine’s vision appeared almost suffocated by a certain (often racialised) existential dread of annihilation. There was something deeply disconcerting about his adolescent work, something familiar yet at the same time fantastically strange. I found myself nodding in reluctant recognition at the sheer anguish of a line he spontaneously rapped on the island of Guadeloupe about the Middle Passage slave ship, the ‘Guadeloupe Express’ as he so pithily named it. Befuddled by the lyricism of the words he was using to transmit his disturbing affect, I also knew that he was tapping into the reality of the ghosts that hovered around us. Two years later, gazing uncomfortably at drawings and paintings the artist had on public display in the summer of 2015 at the Chelsea Academy in London, I remembered the horror of that song he sang as I beheld the spirit of Frantz Fanon simmering beneath the rage of the objectified, racialised subject at the heart of the (then) schoolboy’s biopolitical images. Four years later, something had changed. In ‘Voodoo Child’, Quiquine’s

¹ From the V&A’s press release on their Residency programme, 9 September 2019
exhibition at London’s Africa Centre in the spring of 2019,² the artist displayed an internal world, a world that ‘splits’ not only in order to simply survive but also to leave traces of a radically metamorphosed being. Quiquine has stated without hesitation that the exhibition was a conscious attempt at a self-reinvention that was nothing short of post-traumatic rebirth:

The nightmares [of my earlier work] were so much closer to the surface. They were literally bursting out of me. Back then, when I wanted to create art, I just went straight towards unhealed trauma. That isn’t the case now. I strongly believe that the artist’s duty isn’t so much to encourage or perpetuate trauma in others, but rather to serve as some kind of inspiration: to encourage healing.³

In 2015, I published a broadly psychoanalytical article, not about Quiquine but about two other diasporic artists whose work turns constantly on uncanny trauma and fantastical transformation: the controversial Haitian writer Marie Vieux Chauvet (1916–1973) and the acclaimed French novelist and playwright Marie NDiaye (born 1967). I described the two women’s overlapping literary universes in the following way:

Hemmed in on all sides by forces that sometimes appear truly demonic, [their] protagonists find themselves literally coming apart at the seams, unravelling into forms and states that are no longer recognizable as human, or even fully alive. Under the pressure of continual assaults from societies bent on over-classifying and invading their bodies and minds, before attempting to wipe them out altogether, these characters splinter down fault-lines that stretch out along the wounds of unspeakable stigmata.⁴

In that article I attempted to reveal a kind of hidden psycho-spiritual kinship between Chauvet and NDiaye, expressed via a shared mode of fantastical representation in which the self, under pressure from various forms of systemic and internalised trauma, found itself splitting into three distinct parts. Trying to make sense of the two women’s seeming preoccupation with a specifically tripartite splitting, I turned to psychoanalysis for direction. I found my most helpful guidance in the writings of Sándor Ferenczi, the radical psychotherapist whom Freud once considered to be his natural successor.

For Ferenczi, it was increasingly clear that under the pressure of overwhelming and indigestible lived experience the human psyche begins to splinter along three distinct fault lines.⁵ In his remarkable Clinical Diary of 1932–1933, Ferenczi describes the way in which he

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² Moses Quiquine’s ‘Voodoo Child’ exhibition was at the Africa Centre, London, 22 March–14 April 2019
³ From an unpublished interview the author conducted with the artist, 2019; all further quotes from the artist are from this interview
⁴ Andrew Asibong, ‘Three is the loneliest number: Marie Vieux Chauvet, Marie NDiaye and the traumatized triptych’, Yale French Studies 128, 2015, pp 146–160, p 147
⁵ Sándor Ferenczi’s importance in the history of psychoanalysis is only just starting to be acknowledged by the analytic community. Cast out of the inner circle by an increasingly irate Freud, who was furious at his former disciple’s insistence upon reinstating the centrality of actual (as opposed to fantasised) sexual assault in the treatment of patients, Ferenczi would die in 1933, aged 59, pathologised as insane by Freud’s influential biographer, the analyst Ernest Jones, and relegated to the margins of therapeutic theory and practice.
came to see that some of his patients had psychically divided into three distinct part-selves, noting that the ‘tripartitum [was] a form of adaptation to the apparently unbearable situation’. The three fragments Ferenczi identifies in his diary are highly specific. Firstly, there is ‘a being suffering purely psychically in his [sic] unconscious, the actual child, of whom the awakened ego knows absolutely nothing’. Secondly, there is a quasi-divine fragment, a ‘singular being’ (to whom one of Ferenczi’s patients gives the name ‘Orpha’) which ‘plays the role of a guardian angel’ and which produces ‘wish-fulfilling hallucinations’ and ‘consolation fantasies’ and ‘anaesthetizes the consciousness and sensitivity against sensations as they become unbearable’, even if simultaneously running the risk of finding itself unable to help in any way short of ‘squeezing the entire psychic life out of the inhumanly suffering body’ and seeking ‘to encourage suicide’. Finally, Ferenczi tells us, there is ‘a third, soulless part of the personality … a body increasingly divested of its soul, whose disintegration is not perceived at all or is regarded as an event happening to another person, being watched from the outside’.

For Ferenczi, the goal of therapy is ‘to re-integrate the split-off selves into the main self … recasting the unconscious aspects of the superego into preconscious parts’. His trauma-informed perspective on the three-way splitting – and potential re-suturing – of the traumatised human psyche, explored so insightfully in the literature of Marie Chauvet and Marie NDiaye, finds its theological antecedent in Haitian vodun. Vodun tells of a splitting that comes into being under the most extreme circumstances of environmental impingement: enslavement, enforced transportation, extermination and institutionalised sexual assault. And the three parts of the divided self that are elaborated within vodun anticipate, with uncanny precision, the specifically trauma-derived tripartite split described by Ferenczi. Thus we find that the Haitian soul cleaves into the following three parts: the ti bonanj (‘petit bon ange’), the gwo bonanj (‘gros bon ange’) and the ko kadav (‘corps cadavre’). It is difficult not to be impressed by the realisation that vodun’s conception of the self as split into three is so strikingly similar to the tripartite division that would be discovered by Ferenczi in his analysis of the survivors of trauma. One part is individualised and rooted in personal, emotional experience (ti bonanj); a second is cosmically connected to the ancestors and the gods (gwo bonanj); and the third is a cut-off, unfeeling shell of corporeal flesh (ko kadav). Thus, vodun, a marginalised and stigmatised branch of religion, offers an uncanny black mirror to Ferenczian therapy, a marginalised and stigmatised branch of psychoanalysis, and both base their vision on the

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7 Ibid, pp 8–9
8 Ibid, pp 9–10
9 Ibid, p 9
11 See Craig Stephenson, Possession: Jung’s Comparative Anatomy of the Psyche (Routledge, Oxford, 2009) and Alessandra Benedicty, ‘Towards an Intellectual History of Possession: Reading la crise as a Textual Space in Vodou and André Breton’s Haitian Lectures and Nadja’ (Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses, vol 41, no 2, 2012, 280–305) for more details of the compelling parallels to be discovered between discourses and practices of ‘possession’, vodun and European psychoanalytic models of trauma, splitting and desubjectification
recognition of a three-part soul that, unlike Freud’s (1985) more universally recognised ‘id’, ‘ego’ and ‘superego’ (not to mention Christianity’s ‘father’, ‘son’ and ‘holy ghost’), is born of both structural and interpersonal violation.

It was not until I saw Quiquine’s 2019 exhibition at the Africa Centre that it dawned on me that if Marie Vieux Chauvet and Marie NDiaye were cultural ‘twins’ connected by the peculiar form of a simultaneously Ferenczian and vodun-derived tripartite psychical splitting and transformation that they returned again and again to explore, then Quiquine was surely the two women’s missing ‘triplet’. Each major piece of his ‘Voodoo Child’ triptych is itself fissured into three split-off yet fantastically communicating fragments: firstly, an emotionally repressed yet potentially alive, child-like fragment; secondly, a fragment identified with mad, quasi-divine, annihilating experience; and, thirdly, a fragment that has become desensitised, emptied-out, zombified. Let us consider, to start with, his work entitled Sahar World. ‘Sahar’, Quiquine informed me, is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘to bear, to endure.’ The first piece he set about creating for the exhibition, it appears itself to have been something of an endurance test for the artist. The period of its creation was, says Quiquine, marked by bouts of severe procrastination and self-doubt. Three figures can be seen in the work: someone lying naked on the ground; a priest standing over this figure; and, finally, a third person standing,
observing, by the thicket. Quiquine could not be more explicit in his description of the scene: ‘All the figures in Sahar World are pieces of me’. Struggling to come up with a work that would mark a radical break with his helplessly painful representations of the past, he at last found the three human elements in the new project arising, seemingly spontaneously, from a deeply unconscious part of his mind, resistant to both planning and prescription. A trip to Guadeloupe at the time of the work’s conception appears to have been instrumental in helping Quiquine to create and deliver the piece: ‘I needed to connect with the land and its regenerative energy,’ he explains, adding ‘I wanted to bring something good into existence … but suffering is still embedded at the heart of the scene.’ It is via a depiction of three-part subjectivity, then, that goodness can, finally, emerge from suffering: if the supine figure, the suffering body, is in need of healing in Sahar World, then this positive transformation can only be brought about by the generation of a specifically divine second, powerful part of a split-off being which presides over the curative process; the whole operation must be witnessed, however, by the third, child-like, unconscious-yet-feeling, observer part of the self.

Without conscious knowledge of either Ferenczian psychotherapeutic theory or the finer details of Haitian vodun theology, Quiquine seems to have duplicated precisely the same kinds of tripartite splitting elaborated in both those systems of thought (themselves not consciously...
connected). The struggling artist-self finds itself spontaneously divided into: i. an observing, child-like unconscious; ii. a paralysed body, close to death; and iii. a priest-like, supernatural potency. A gigantic, living tree towers over all the parts – the final piece of the injured soul’s quest for cosmic containment.

Something similarly miraculous appears to take place in the second piece of the triptych, the work entitled *The Sacrifice*. Enthused by his sense that the surprising birth of *Sahar World* on a piece of leather had, seemingly of its own accord, facilitated an exciting shift within his own anxiously procrastinating mind-body system, Quiquine was, for this second piece, optimistic that in this next work ‘I would do even more healing’. Inspired by a memory of Barbados when he was only five years old, *The Sacrifice*, created on goatskin, represents a process of simultaneously aesthetic and psycho-spiritual alchemy. The memory had at its centre the feeling of something terrible. Having established a routine with his sister of going along to feed the same local goat every day, the two children were one day to discover a menacing dog hanging from the goat’s neck. ‘There were no adults around,’ he recalls, ‘just me, my sister, the dog and the dying goat.’ The next day, the family had goat for dinner. Whilst his sister cried in her realisation of what had happened, Quiquine found that he struggled to process any of the unpleasant experience, either via tears or any other cathartic channelling of emotion. Instead, he found himself thinking about the goat and its horrific demise some twenty years later, unsure what, if anything, he remembered or felt. He decided to explore his blankness through the process of creation. What emerged from the attempt to represent this (non)memory, laden with traumatic (non)affect, is remarkable. The goat is transformed into a white deer (inspired by the image on a postcard he had received, by chance, around the same time); and the slaveriing, murderous dog of the Barbadian past is inaccurately modelled on his adult sister’s current dog, an animal who, by Quiquine’s own admission, is neither frightening nor vicious: ‘In the finished piece it ends up being a kinder dog, just watching.’ The most drastic metamorphosis is, perhaps, the altered dyad of Quiquine and his sister that, in the artwork, is turned into a three-person group: a triad of figures inspired by a photograph from Morocco, in which the artist captures ‘a moment of love, warmth and solidarity among three people after what had been a real collective experience of distress’. The work, supposed to be the artistic representation of a gruesome, bloody memory, unexpectedly filtered through a creative consciousness that is both aware of trauma having taken place and also concerned to inject an energy that is in some way healing, ends up being another image of post-traumatic ‘three-ness’: a serenely passive goat-deer, on its way, perhaps, to death; an observing canine consciousness, no longer necessarily the butcher of the scene, but instead, perhaps, its key witness; and a divinely human, self-healing collective, itself split (but reconnected) into three distinct consciousnesses. Some kind of cosmic alteration has taken place through the creative process, enabling ‘sacrifice’ to be averted, and communication to become possible. ‘It’s the piece people gravitate to most’, says Quiquine, ‘they seem to like its warmth.’
The third fragment of the triptych is entitled *Hell is the land of tranquil light*. Taking only two weeks to make (compared with the four months it took Quiquine to complete *Sahar World*), it appears to have been born out of an atmosphere – facilitated by the creation of the two previous parts of the triptych – of radical surrender and trust. Starting from a *sahar* place of having to endure, and having traversed a zone of sacrifice narrowly averted, we find ourselves now in a space of confident journeying. This is a more magnanimous world. We see trees bearing tiny images – upon closer inspection we see that these images are pieces of actual, physical film. They cannot be seen from a distance, but only become visible when we take a closer look. Quiquine has said of the piece:

I was really trying to convey that idea of arrival, of having actually arrived at where I needed to be. There’s always another destination, of course, but I wanted to prove to myself that I could arrive from a colder world and arrive in a new realm and be ok, even if that place is still called hell. Hell is technically ‘bad’, but within it there is always a possibility of goodness.

These appear to be images springing from a spirit of playfulness. No longer the paralysed figure lying on the forest floor, Quiquine is channelling more and more of the experimental
energy of the high priest of *vodun*. The figure of Jimi Hendrix, the original ‘voodoo chile’, adrift in a world of (racialised) trauma and addiction, rides on a wildebeest in Quiquine’s surreal vision, its horns made of blown glass with magical bubbles growing from those horns. The dog returns as a fresh observer, its mouth made of actual dog-bone taken from a canine burial ground discovered haphazardly in Guadeloupe. Again, there are three figures: the suffering artist, full of potential but perhaps on his way to death; a sympathetically observing canine witness; and a divinely omnipotent beast of healing. However diverse Quiquine’s dream-visions of this triptych, the same structure of splitting and potential transcendence of trauma seems to emerge, like a miracle.

The teenage artist who spontaneously created the disturbing *Guadeloupe Express* (slave-song-that-never-was) in 2013 has not, in my view, been left behind. And I would be surprised if his preoccupation with trauma has been fully forgotten. But the Africa Centre exhibition of 2019 suggests to me that Quiquine is developing a simultaneously creative and genuinely spiritual persona, three-headed and powerful, that is enabling him to do more kindly work, even as his creative output becomes more and more sophisticated. His development, then, is both aesthetic and emotional. The young, sensitised sufferer of the painful, early work has grown a divine aspect as well as a witnessing, feeling self; and the three parts walk the world in solidarity. Quiquine crosses continents, discourses and boundaries in a way that is comparable to the syncretistic communications of Black Atlantic – or even ‘post-Black’ – writers such as Marie Vieux Chauvet and Marie NDiaye, whose work first led me to the
tripartite divisions uncovered by Ferenczian psychoanalysis, as well as Haitian *vodun*. Quiquine is one of those diasporic artists who will potentially function as a true alchemist for our afflicted world culture. I have observed him as he has developed a myriad of transversal and cross-disciplinary talents and capacities, from music to drama, from painting to fashion design. Whatever he does feels infused with the same spirit of fearless openness to connection; his is a peculiarly provocative cultural and aesthetic *bricolage*. Whether his creative energies are conscious, unconscious, or indeed pre-conscious, the artist seems determined to transform unbearable experience into the strange representations of an aliveness rooted in rebirth.

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