

Lina Iris Viktor, *No. XXXVI Now back at the Beginning . . . I beckon you for the Long Journey into Night., 2023.*
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

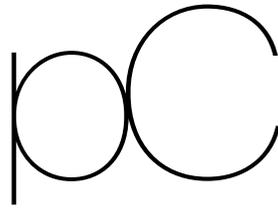
The Dark Continent: Story-Map to Another Place **Adjoa Armah**

The acts that make up Lina Iris Viktor's series *The Dark Continent* (2016–2023) contain within them a story-map of/to another world. This map is instructional as well as descriptive. It opens up a black geography anachronistic to and out of reach of imperial time-space. This continent has always been here and still is yet to come.

The map's address affirms darkness as originary and rejects the possibility of its colonisation. Its first act, *I, Genesis* (2016), opens:

*No. I * We descended from a darkness that belongs to no one . . .*
*No. II * Still, you hold no claim here*

From this statement of origins to the refusal of the possessive impulse, this world, populated by the artist's own unclothed body, resists the abuses of the ethnographic gaze that its clotheslessness and location evokes. For Viktor, the figure is "a universal body. It appears as a female form but is not really attached to the idea of gender at all." Instead, it attends to the universality of a life-giving experience coded as female but reaches further, extending beyond its human associations into ecological and cosmic origins and possibilities.



*I. Genesis continues, referencing the history of Western literary and philosophical thought by calling upon Socratic dialogue: No. III ** If we be shadows cast upon cave walls, it is that we are light keepers (2016); the 'we' of its address, seemingly applying to this universal figure, containing multitudes within a singular form inhabiting an environment that appears to have its own agency. We, through Viktor's series:*

meet the world halfway.

We drink the sun.

We have rested.

We utter histories of everything you were never told.

We once sought refuge there.

We would rise.

We ate the sun.

We, the night — the giver of all presences.

We Gods had hidden from ourselves.

We built a world in my image.

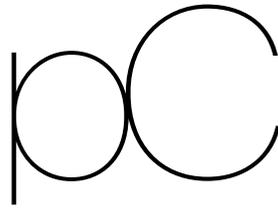
We are coming back into ourselves.

Yet, none will dwell here but We.

This 'we' that closes the fourth act of the series is also a boundary. The Dark Continent is not available to all. Even with its cosmology of connection – its awareness of *our* colonial history and logics – the terrain and narrator(s) of The Dark Continent are not totally accessible to those bound to our world. Its plural pronoun offers up an ecologically-bound spirituality and descriptive method. Viktor explains:

I'm interested in sciences, in stories of the universe and cosmologies. There are questions we grapple with as human beings throughout time. What is our place here? What is our relationship with the sky above us? We've always been trying to discern and compute that – this work speaks to the multiplicity of that computation.

The 'we' that drinks the sun speaks both to the fantastic vegetation of this terrain and the universal figure that leads us through it. Viktor's universal body appears at moments to consume other cosmic bodies, a single



human capable of not only containing multiple subjects but the entirety of all matter. Another way in which the series offers an alternative proposition for descriptive method is in its relationship to cartography, which, along with ethnography, has been one of the main descriptive tools of colonising forces. Viktor utilises images associated with both of these tools to subvert their function.

In *Eleventh* (2018), the artist's clothed body is presented against a red, blue and gold map of pre-colonial African ethnic groups. In an earlier work, *Tenth* (2018), the golden map describes the same land with colonial territory lines and names (though what was before remains – if not in the naming of the nations, in the naming of the small communities also visible here). Viktor speaks to historical moments where attempts to redraw the African continent beyond cartographies of dominance have fallen short:

The Dark Continent started because I needed a way to think beyond the black and white of race thinking. In Tenth I was thinking specifically of Liberia. During its early formation and development so much was transplanted from the American context. It was kind of built as a mirror image: there was a Maryland and there was a Virginia. The political system, economic systems and hierarchical thinking were also transplanted.

The transplantation in the early 19th century of settler colonial norms and spatial descriptions from North America to West Africa, which showed little concern for what already existed in the terrain that would become Liberia, was foundational to the conflict that arose in the nation of birth of Viktor's parents. The promise of a nation built upon Black liberation not yet reached. By reimagining The Dark Continent as a territory that exists beyond physical geography, Viktor's terrain is limitless. This Dark Continent reclaims both space and narrative; the narration operating simultaneously as a history, mythology, a vantage point and route around this other place, identifiable as much with our bodies as it is with that of the protagonist's universal figure. In discussing her relationship with narration Viktor proclaims, "I love words... words run parallel to the making of the work", continuing:

I wanted to paint a picture that could be married with the work. So when you read it, it kind of completely changes your viewpoint but the words can also live discretely as well.

Words not only run in parallel to the making of these works formally – they make its world. As such, *The Dark Continent* joins other traditions – from the light-bringing primordial words of the biblical Genesis referenced in the opening act, to the sound Yo, the sonic beginning of Bambara cosmology – becoming more than appendages to the colonial imagination. It is given its own temporality, its own origins and destination, a different trajectory that does not have to mirror that of coloniality even though it recognises it.

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Adjoa Armah is an artist, educator and writer with a background in design anthropology. Her practice is concerned with narrative, the archive, pedagogy, black ontology and spatial consciousness. She is founder of saman archive, a gathering of photographic negatives encountered across Ghana, through which she explores models of institution building grounded in Akan temporalities and West African technologies of social and historical mediation. Armah is also a DPhil researcher in Fine Art (practice-led) at Ruskin School of Art in the University of Oxford.

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