

SHAKESPEARE IN AFRICAN DRESS: NEGOTIATING A NEW BLACK IDENTITY

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La plus grande lâcheté des hommes étant le silence, tout devra parler à haute voix. Je voudrais que cette pièce crée un choc à l'intérieur du grand silence blanc des idées.¹

[The greatest act of cowardice on the part of any man is to keep silent. It is therefore incumbent on every one of us to speak out aloud. It is my wish that this play would shock to the very core those who blandly remain tongue-tied.]

Repetition and difference are two theoretical concepts used to question various notions of representation.² Even if we may consider making a distinction—difference tends to be affected by divergence and repetition is concealment and displacement—yet, these concepts tend to manifest themselves within the field of representation as constant and incessant questioning of their movement. Repetition and difference are at play whenever a comparison is made between then and now, this culture and another, many moments and a single moment. If one culture—a single one among many—is the field of observation and the object of discourse, how do we think about its continuities and changes, its repetitions and differences? While postcolonial discourse is, so to speak, the site of displacement in many critical discourses in the West, it is also precisely through this discourse that the question of difference is persistently foreclosed.

This paper scrutinizes this urge to understand “difference” and “repetition” which as a space of resistance reflects the ambiguity of the postcolonial subject. It does so by considering repetition and difference in the rewriting of Shakespeare’s plays *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* by an African. Rewriting these plays is a discursive gesture through which the question of

“difference” dislocates fixed definitions, such that opposing cultures seem to become interminably interchangeable with one another. “Shakespeare in African Dress: Negotiating a New Black Identity” may be understood as a recuperation of agency and re-presentation by the postcolonial subject through a space opened up by cultural encounters of the colonizer and the colonized. It is clear, then, that Sony Labou Tansi highlights intertextuality as cultural collaboration in which knowledge is always produced with difference meaning “affirmation” in Deleuzian term.

Moi, Veuve de l'Empire is the French title of these versions of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and of *Julius Caesar* by the Congolese author and playwright Sony Labou Tansi. He is the foremost Congolese writer of the 20th century—he is the author of several novels and plays, and the founder of his own theater group called “Le Rocado Zulu Théâtre de Brazzaville.” The French public discovered Labou Tansi through his novels, *La vie et demi* (1979), *L'Etat honteux* (1981), *L'anté-peuple* (1983), *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985), all of which were published by Editions du Seuil. In 1986 at the Festival of Francophonie in Limoges, France, Tansi was celebrated not as a novelist but as a playwright, through his play *Antoine m'a vendu son destin*. Since then, his other plays have been staged internationally such as *Conscience du tracteur* (NEA-CLE, 1979), *La parenthèse de sang*, and *Je soussigné cardiaque* (Hatier, 1981). Sony Labou Tansi died in June 1995.

Moi, Veuve de l'Empire (Avant-Scène, 1987) is a work whose poetic structure and cynical tone would have made Shakespeare applaud, since the throwing out of the Empire as well as Caesar's assassination are metaphors for every nation which is falling apart. Indeed, this play's poetic reconstruction of collective symbols is charged with the task of inventing metaphors, symbols, and ritual ceremonies that liberate the mind from the closure of “History.” Tansi's central move in this adaptation of Shakespeare is an alternative one: in this case, Julius Caesar is killed because he is becoming tyrannical and Cleopatra's energy is “cathected” efficiently, as she has learned the rules to set herself *free*. It is interesting to note, however, that Tansi revisits the question of gender as a fundamental ambiguity within postcolonial discourse.

Through rewriting Shakespeare's play, Tansi displaces the *mise en scène* of Western culture. He does this by questioning gaps and silence inscribed in the theatrical representation of the West, by reinventing new images, by working from the abyss, and by constructing prophetic visions along ritual lines.

Cleopatra retells her story in sublime language in which one can find jewels of hope even if they are charged with Tansi's anger which brings contradictions to the fore and mobilizes them in order to move the dominant discourse into an ongoing crisis: Cleopatra is crying out in despair and yet concludes the play with this powerful line: "Nous allons ouvrir l'Histoire à tous les hommes" (Tansi 32). [We are going to open the doors of History to all peoples.] This idea may require distancing the African context from the Western one. This distance is not, however, paralyzing or irredeemably compromising. The voices of "Others" must be heard and not silenced by being squeezed into or ignored by Western discourse. In his remarks in the "Note to the Director," Tansi alerts Westerners to the illusory basis of Western discourse effort at "letting the others speak":

Assez de Shakespeare, messieurs, parlons de nous.
Enough of Shakespeare, sirs, let's talk about ourselves.
Wa dia fwa, yati yika dio. Bisi Kongo bo batele.³

This means that our attempts to "explore the 'Other' point of view" and "to give it a chance to speak for itself" must always be distinguished from the other's struggles. In the case of Tansi, this means that he speaks from the position of a Congolese and that his speech can be localized within the postcolonial context despite the logical inconsistencies propelling it. Tansi knows however that it is necessary for him to first master his own language before attempting to appropriate the master's discursive control over language. Derrida discusses the question of the other's language in *Racism's Last Word* by pointing out that one must master how to "speak the other's language without renouncing [our] own" (294). Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" brilliantly analyses the question of whether the subaltern can really speak or is doomed to be mute. The contradictory space opened up by subaltern discourse does not sustain the double displacement which accomplishes the shift from the language of the subaltern to the master's language. In other words, the subaltern is facing "a wall"; therefore to speak or to learn how to speak means to find a hole and then the wall will tumble. In fact, when Tansi says "Enough of Shakespeare, sirs, let's talk about ourselves," he is only reminding Africans that it is about time to learn how to speak, to find a hole for themselves, for their history to be heard. We must be grateful to Tansi for reminding us that figures of rupture and discontinuity in the play *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire*, define the agency of the postcolonial moment, through displacing the substitutive patterns enacted by

colonial discourse. These models of infinite and contradictory substitution, marking both the commodification of the colonized subject and the exposure of colonialism's own vulnerability, are countered by postcolonialism's appropriation of temporalities of doubleness as the shifting ground of its contestation of liminality and exclusion. A postcolonial culture is formulated too often as a reductive response to colonial domination, creating a doubling of colonial disjunctures that delimits the postcolonial by maintaining colonial hierarchies and oppositions. The construction of a discourse of subaltern resistance, tracing the teleologies of an alternative, associative signification, draws on the moments of iteration and renewal that make such a culture possible. It is in this space that the play *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire*, engenders the inscription of a subaltern subjectivity whose uncanny doubleness sanctions the modernity of the postcolonial condition, ultimately grounding it in terms which confront colonialism's original repression while simultaneously resisting it. Spivak notes:

In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* "unlearns" female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized. Thus, to question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman even within the anti-imperialist project of subaltern studies is not as Jonathan Culler suggests, to "produce difference by differing" or to "appeal ... to a sexual identity defined as essential and privilege experiences associated with that identity." (295)

Tansi is quite aware of the cultural implications for a colonized person who seeks "to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for)" in this particular postcolonial context. But what is crucial to understand here is not that the "subaltern" cannot speak, but instead, that the subaltern's speech is not "only" localizable in the postcolonial context, strictly speaking. As a consequence, the whole discussion of whether it even matters to effective anti-colonial opposition that the subaltern's speech be so located is really irrelevant. Tansi has shown within this play that subalterns speak every day and no matter what happens they will continue to speak even if their words often appear as unspoken since they are inscribed within the structure of colonialism and postcolonialism. By

using these three different languages, Tansi draws attention to the fact that subalternity cannot be reduced to the effects Westerners assume subaltern speech ought to have if it is truly oppositional. Therefore, Tansi calls for the imperative necessity to “unlearn” the masters’ language in order to speak the subaltern’s language. In this sense then, the staging of *Moi, Veuve de l’Empire*, becomes the mnemonic space of resistance for Tansi’s play.

Let us reflect on this title *Moi, Veuve de l’Empire*: by definition the word *veuve* means *widow* but in colloquial French the word also refers to the *guillotine*, both meanings being rather complementary to Tansi’s play (to marry the widow, “épouser la veuve,” means to be guillotined)—as they work to symbolize the closure of the system or separation from it. *Moi, Veuve de l’Empire* does not click with the system; the link is broken as the conditions for re-presentation and its power are held out to be located “elsewhere”—in light of the fact that the notion of theatricality itself is still the privileged mode of representation in Western discourse. This is, then, also the point where the discourse and machinery of Western theater itself need to be critiqued, as Spivak suggests in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” when she expresses that “unlearning to speak involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized” (91).

What could be more compelling than this authoritative command given by Sony Labou Tansi himself in his “Note to the director”? “It is my wish that this play would shock to the very core those who blandly remain tongue-tied” (4). What Tansi means by creating “a shock” is the articulation of his own refusal to be silent. This gesture needs to be supplemented by another reminder—that it keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet: the refusal to speak on behalf of the other, which nevertheless forms one’s participation in the global articulation of the other’s position. It does not lapse either into a silence based on principles but ultimately fraught with problems, or a hallucinatory affirmation of the other’s voice. And yet, the voices of everyday life are concealed in the crowd, voices that one hears as a murmur, in the exchange which one forgets having heard. The voices of the compatriots one would just as soon forget in their tyrannical repetition of “ideologies”; “public opinion” becomes a perverse mirror of an utterance machine one mystifies as the silenced “system.” One yearns for the voice with which a life speaks yet at the same time one screens out the voices which have fled through the cracks in that hegemonic wall. I use the word “wall” because postcolonial subjects have experienced it as

such, because it is a front for an apparatus which is hidden for them, because it is plain (as in “plain speech”) and dense (the “weight of public opinion”) and because they run into it, without hope of ever finding the open door as reminded by Cleopatra in *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire*: “L'Histoire reste fermée aux Nègres” (Tansi 15) [History remains closed to Blacks]. One would think that rather than building a new wall, one would just keep an ear pricked for the voices which do escape. But anything that escapes must be dangerous and these collisions are capable of producing a curious satisfaction in a way. Thus, one finds herself/himself pacing along a stretch of “wall,” muttering the phrases which will become one’s own brick in this wall—too distracted and fearful to register the multitude of voices which surround, constitute, penetrate, or escape this most wailing of walls.

One might say that we are simply not suited, temperamentally, to the brouhaha or “clamor” of voices which incessantly cry out like “Cleopatra” or “Le Spectre” throughout the play *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire*: “Ouvrez l'Histoire à tous les hommes” (32) [Sirs, let us open the doors of History to all peoples.] Is this the only multitude of voices we hear/have heard? Or rather, do these voices cast a continuous-fixed sound? Just as we are unsuited to History if it is just “one damn thing after another,” (Toynbee n. pag.) and if Tansi’s question is disturbing enough, it should give us cause to pause and reflect, since the power of memory lies in its activation for an interpretation of the present: “Et si nous étions en train de répéter tragiquement l'Histoire?” (Tansi 4) [And what if we were only repeating History tragically?] We are unsuited to all that proliferates, repeats itself, fragments; all that which “makes no sense” in the way we are accustomed to “making sense.” So what a surprise that while we are busy at our various construction sites we should be visited by one of our “own” who has not only opened himself to the horde of voices but has created them in turn; the eruption of a certain alterity or “otherness” opens, or re-opens, a rather different space within the not so hermetically sealed site: a space marked by resistance and its power of displacement that *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire* screens out for us.

In his well-known book, *The Theater and its Double*, Antonin Artaud sets in motion a force that he called the theater of cruelty. Reacting against the decadent state of the theater and culture of his time, Artaud wanted to create a theater that aimed beyond everyday concerns, meaning an inspirational theater for life:

a performance is never very far from the human body, from the staging of life in perpetual crisis ... that through the labyrinth of their gestures, attitudes, and sudden cries, through the gyrations and turns which leave no portion of the stage upon signs and no longer upon words. (54)

Artaud wanted to free the theater from this subordination to the written text, that is why he talks about the timbre of the voice, of cruelty as the absolute gauge of sincerity of the mask, followed by primitive music which does not necessarily appear in the text. Artaud's theory of the theater of the loss of the body in order to perform is much richer than is possible to demonstrate here. In fact, Artaud himself questions the very notion of staging in the theatrical representation of Western culture, but indeed, however "revolutionary" his theory, it nonetheless reinscribes the privileged stage of representation in Western culture. Jean-François Lyotard in his essays "The Unconscious as *mise-en-scène*" and "*La dent, la paume*" suggests interesting alternative ways of rethinking the notion of the stage that Artaud did not explore sufficiently enough in his own art:

On the "outside," the tooth ache, on the "inside," its representation by the clenching of the fist. But the usiness of an energetic theater is not to make allusion to the aching tooth when a clenched fist is the point, nor the reverse. Its business is neither to suggest that such and such means such and such, nor to say it, as Brecht wanted. Its business is to produce the highest intensity (by excess or by lack of energy) of what there is without intention. That is my question: is it possible, how? (110)

In fact, "le théâtre énergétique" is part of the body of a theatrical art which consists in finding alternative ways of exploring the stage of representation, but as Lyotard's question—"is it possible, how?"—suggests, his theory still runs up against its own limits of representation. Neither Artaud nor Lyotard explores or thinks of how they may eventually open the privileged stage of representation for "alternative stages." Therefore, *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire* is subversive in that it shows precisely through by its clichés and stereotypes a "silent" critique of this circular mode of thinking in dominant discourses. In other words, Tansi's play indicates that although dominant discourses are characterised by closure, they are not themselves closed but constantly negotiated and reconstructed by the conjuncture of discourses in which they are produced.

Where traditional theater wants to produce “well-rounded,” “believable,” and “realistic” characters, “other stages”, such as Tansi’s play, aligns itself with post-structuralist experimental forms of theater to introduce figures with ruptures, sutures, and inconsistencies capable of creating problems out of the terms of theatrical illusions. Where traditional Western theater strives for the illusions of totality and closure, “other stages” are engaged in activities of dissecting and opening. The ongoing debate among theorists of the theater about whether the theater is to be conceived of as a mirror of reality or as an alternative space, is accordingly decided as “neither/nor” by Tansi’s play. His theatrical space definitely does not have its model in a so-called “real” space anymore, but “elsewhere,” formalized in “the closure of representation” (232) discussed by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*—since at the core of theatrical repetition lies its own closure, its own death. If the theorizing of theater leaves us with a feeling of dissatisfaction, it is because there is something inherently problematic about theater itself as a mode of representation.

Confronting this culture’s long-standing interpretation of the stage of representation, Tansi’s play displaces his stage of representation “elsewhere,” and his *mise en scène* is an aesthetic phenomenon: what he gives us is the theatricality of life for Africans; in other words, the existence of their theater depends on changes. To describe the written play as a kind of actual social experience requires, first of all, a shift away from the familiar notion of mimesis. It takes a line suggested by Umberto Eco’s essay, “Semiotic of Theatrical Performance,” which proposes that “theater does not imitate life, but rather it is social life that is designed as a continuous performance, and because of this, there is a link between theater and life” (113). For Tansi, theater is a space for lived collective experiences for oppressed people. Consequently, throughout the play, there is a certain fluidity in the handling of both time and space. As an anti-illusory device, the past, the present, and the future dovetail in a continuum that is forged by flashbacks of everyday imperialist clichés, stereotypes, and narrative as indicated in Act I Scene 4:

Une Toyota rouge apparaît au fond de la scène... Jullius Caïd Kaesaire, qui, comme en chef d’orchestre dirige le chœur tout en fumant un énorme cigare. Il est en jeans, le torse nu. Sur sa couronne, on lit en lettre de chrome: “PARIS-DAKAR”... Il s’assied sur le nez de la Toyota, fouille dans ses poches, en sort deux cocas en bouteille qu’il décapsule avec ses dents. (11)

[A red Toyota appears at the rear of the stage... Jullius Caïd Kaesaire, who as leader of the band is directing the chorus, is smoking an enormous cigar. He is in jeans, his torso completely bare. On his crown one reads in chrome letters: "PARIS- DAKAR"... He sits on the hood of the Toyota, searches hispockets, and out pop two Coca-Cola bottles which he uncaps withhis teeth.]

In this scene are re-enacted the main phases of the history of the exploitation of African peoples as well as disturbing signs of the colonized body at risk, disturbing reminders of the violence underlying the colonial encounter. These correspond to the exploitation of Black labor in the Western World and the contemporary anti-imperialist struggle. Once again, we are reminded that the proletariat is a class in which a materialist conception of history begins, and upon whom the negative, alienating aspects of a life-activity fragmented by the division of labor devolves. Rather than consume and enjoy, they only produce and suffer, having lost the fullness of their "human essence." The strength of this scene derives from their close articulation into that contemporary anti-imperialism. We find ourselves in a time where the *logotypes* "Toyota," "jeans," "Coca-Cola" are as universal as any signs—as imperialist domination. Staging these signs is to ridicule them; the stage occupied by Africans embodies the refusal to acknowledge the authority of those institutions which exert and extend their hegemony. Furthermore, the presence of these signs means that one is subjected to social exploitation whose origins are beyond one's individual grasp, but it also means becoming a spectacle whose "aesthetic" power increases with one's increasing awkwardness and helplessness. The details of the stage notes demand that actors perform this with mechanical motions. Tansi's insight is powerful here. The moment the actors are released with these imperialist objects into the field of vision is also the moment when these objects are made excessive and dehumanized. This excess is the *mise en scène* of modernity *par excellence*. Although Tansi's statements are ostensibly obvious, what they reveal is the hierarchical structuring of energies which are distributed between "spectacle" and "spectator" in the intellectual endeavors which form the basis of culture. If the actors as such make apparent a human being's dependence on bodily needs and on social situations, then it also means that the moment of theatricalization coincides, in effect, with an inevitable dehumanization in the form of a physically automatized object, which is produced as spectacular excess.

The narrative of the play works on two economies: how can we understand the social which holds promise for liberation (for the oppressed) while it is possible to demonstrate the inequities that will continue to obstruct, since they structure that liberation? Our attempts to respond to this question may be a response which is not an analysis but an opening to further “revelation” and “concealment.” In Act II Scene 1, in the presence of Yoko-Ma Cleopatra declares:

Cléopâtre est tombée ... je fus reine me voici ruban de femme
rapiécée, piétinée, blessée, muette au fond de votre trébuchet
Parce que L'histoire reste fermée aux Nègres
... Dites-lui qu'il est des femmes qu'on ne marchande pas
Cléopâtre jamais ne sera réduite au rang de femme usée
Elle sera libre. (15)

[Cleopatra is fallen ... I was once a queen and now here I am, a
rag-woman, pieced-together, vexed, dumbstruck, ensnared in your
world because the doors of History remain closed to Black People.
... Tell him that there are some women whom one may not treat
as merchandise.
Cleopatra will never be reduced to the level of a used woman.
She will be free.]

Yoka-Ma is the Priest but also Oka-Naves's confidante. In fact, a Priest (*Geistliche* in German is derived from *Geist* “spirit”) belongs to the system and is also the voice that repeats *no*; it is the one that Cleopatra is resisting, because she understands precisely that the Priest is there to articulate and define the conventions of feminine repression. In fact, Cleopatra by stating these lines: “Tell him that there are some women whom one may not treat as merchandise” points out her systematic refusal to be part of the male-dominated system of exchange of women between men that organizes patriarchal societies within African culture. It is within this context of a gender-based marginalization that Cleopatra's words inscribe her desire to free herself by subverting the order of masculine social domination. The theatrical power of language here opens up a reversible theatrical space in which the conditions for representation are subjected to openness for “other stages.” How can *life* or *existence* move into this stance of openness? Not only does it sound difficult for any “agent”

to maneuver into the initial position, but there may be experiences on the edge of this lifeline that preclude a return to certain technically “successful” ways of thinking: that is for Cleopatra to hope that there are possibilities for “openness” for entry into *culture*. This discursive displacement allows Tansi’s repressed desire ultimately to resurface in the desire of the female, doubly colonized other, now refigured as a woman in need of recognition from the ambit of the colonizer’s world as well as from the colonized male world. This is also the moment and the space for Tansi to signify his own blindness—by constructing a character like Cleopatra within the postcolonial discourse—it is clear that Tansi challenges also the African culture that has always already inscribed women as commodities.

Because Tansi, as an African, rewrites this drama this way (Caesar as a tyrant is killed and Cleopatra is a symbol of hope for liberation for the oppressed) he requires us to abandon some of our most cherished notions about Shakespeare’s drama in this context. For the social knowledge (and the responsibility that this knowledge entails) can no longer simply be a matter of empathy or identification with the characters whose sorrows and frustrations are being made part of the spectacle. Rather, social knowledge is the result of the excessive repetition of familiar conventions, a repetition which is expressed both as *theme* and apparatus in Tansi’s play.

Commenting on the closure of “History to Others” as it is meant to be, in Act II Scène 1, Cléopâtre says:

Il est mort...
 vous l’avez tué parce qu’il a essayé d’ouvrir l’Histoire à tous les
 hommes. ...
 Je saigne de tous les coups.
 Que votre bassesse a porté à l’espérance.
 Vous n’empêcherez pas que demain soit un autre
 jour.
 Cléopâtre appartient à cette race d’êtres à qui
 demain est fermé
 Elle a mission et le devoir.
 De cambrioler l’avenir. (14)

[He is dead. You have killed him because he tried to open the doors of history to all peoples. ... I am bleeding from all these blows which your brutality has inflicted upon my hope. You will not prevent another day from dawning tomorrow.
Cleopatra belongs to this race of beings to whom tomorrow is locked shut. She has a mission and a duty: to break in and steal the future.]

Cleopatra has been faced with powerful threats ever since the event of Jullius Caïd's death and yet, she refuses to acknowledge this constraint and is resistant to any other threats. In *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance*, Jean Comaroff analyzes the concept of resistance as inscribed in the lived experience of oppressed people: "Moreover, 'resistance,' is typically neither an all-or-nothing phenomenon nor an act in and of itself; it is frequently part and parcel of practices of subjective and collective reconstruction" (195).

Rather than assimilating herself to the new rules of the "tyrant" Oko-Naves, Cleopatra invents different possibilities of thinking and tactics of survival. On the flip side of domination may be found the "weapons of the weak," if one is sensitized to "read" them. Michel de Certeau in *Practice of Everyday Life* theorizes on the "arts of the weak" (or *tactics*) without inferring from everyday practices the intention, goal-orientation, or motivations that are made the criteria for some interpretations of resistance. The framework he elaborates should be understood as an interpretive tool, rather than as *inferences* from case studies. *Tactics* have only timing and *art*: the arts of memory, of storytelling, of trickery and deception, of ruses which capitalize on the unanticipated moment and take advantage of "opportunities." A tactic has to "*keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight and self-collection. ... It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a distinct, visible, and objectifiable space" (Certeau 37).

Michel de Certeau's theorization of *tactics* as analytical devices for describing different modes of power, and of a group subordinated to foreign hegemony, such as in *Moi, Veuve de l'Empire* is useful in reading this play.

Similarly, by describing the play as an elaboration of the alienating gesture, attention is given to the physical and spatial dimensions of everyday ritual,

since Tansi is quite specific about the landscape of the alienated world. What is critical in Tansi's characterization in this play is not simply the broadly based assimilation of subjectivity to structures of colonialism and slavery, but more precisely the way in which these practices have been emptied of all social and cultural specificity in order to become signifiers of social oppression applicable to a variety of underprivileged groups and contexts. The strength of stories and clichés is not only part of the narrative, but constantly amplifies and reinforces the *tactics* for survival as Michel de Certeau describes them. The actors Marcus Bibulu and Lasso are storytellers and the accumulation of cultural experience constitutes a collective memory that manifests itself cyclically in the concrete forms of rituals. Of course, the poetic structures of ritual carry a more complex and elaborate semantic load than do the inconspicuous signs of the everyday context. For example, in Act III Scene 5 "the King of Babylon" says: "J'ai trop mangé où puis-je soulager mon estomac." [I have eaten too much to the point where I can relax my stomach.] *Yoka-Ma* guides him to the vomitorium. Tansi, in the writing of *Note to the director* puts his criticism in the most cynical of terms: "Les personnages jouent en traînant leurs vomitoriums de poche; Je présente à la civilisation la facture des vomitoriums." [The characters perform by dragging their pocket vomitorium around with them; I present to civilization the bill for the vomitoriums which we manage."] Could we not see the vomitorium as the most perverse and subtle form of disciplinary mechanism that fixed Africa within a Western-dominated system of global dependency?

Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* draws upon the analogy of war, describing strategy as a spatialized form of power requiring a willful and powerful subject, while reminding us that, in fact, one cannot but perform in everyday life. Yet the play poses questions concerning the imperative performance: can they perform at all? Is it possible not to perform? While in "real life" a refusal to perform might amount to cultural, if not physical, suicide, this disappearance act can paradoxically be "performed" on stage and works as a reminder of the fact that we continue to perform ourselves. For instance, in Tableau I Scene 2, if Marcus Bibulu and Lasso were to perform, they would be committing suicide. This means that for them, performing may be "experienced" as traumatic, as Canetti shows in *Crowds and Power*. Every command carries the threat of death—and its sting cannot be escaped, only purged by issuing one's "own" command. Canetti shows us how to uncover unsuspected danger zones by picking up the relatively clear signals of

command. We must take it upon ourselves to uncover and work through the unique commands of our life histories without believing that commands must always act like some alien substance which poisons if it cannot find another host. This individual working-through is inseparable from the transformation of command-institutions. At unpredictable points within these damage zones, free and transcendent movements may arc up and out to create new possibilities for human life in this African community. When a group arcs up together in co-responsibility, it, too, is weighted. If the rising, liberating movement of a community's shared values is to avoid becoming oppression, if it is to become "legitimate," it must go down to each life, overcoming damage again and again as "substantive justice." We cannot say whether this arcing movement of community will become increasingly level, or whether "progress" must always be looking over its shoulder for damage left behind, just as prepared to go back to heal as it is to go into completely new territory.

This is not, however, a play that merely laments the tragedy of the oppressed but it is above all one which also inspires them to rise above their limitations by challenging the conditions of their oppression.

Notes

1. Tansi 4. See Note to the director: written by the author. (Translations of this and other quotations in French are mine).

2. See Gilles Deleuze, the preface to *Différence et répétition*, reminds us of what is most profound or essential in the analysis of these two concepts: "All these signs can be ascribed to a generalized anti-Hegelianism: difference and repetition have taken the place of the identical and the negative of identity and of contradiction" (ixx).

3. Tansi.

4. Tansi wrote these lines in English, French and Lingala, a Bantu language spoken in the Congo.

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