

GESTURES TOWARDS

by Sékou Séméga

PROLOGUE - (UN)MAKING WORLDS

In 2021, I made a vow. I tore it from a performance that once made me, and I carried it like a word in my back pocket. The weight of a whisper, forever telling. We had worked with Jota Mombaça on the performance *opera infinita, chapter A: The Red Earth*¹, a sharing of post-apocalyptic narratives. The only ones that could carry our existences. The luminous will to live below sanctity, provoke the fascist fabulas, shift their axis. Jota asked the group to formulate whatever spell we wanted during the performance, to carve it, make it our own. I remember whispering a tiny prayer, like a vow to the unknown, a vanity: “*I wish to (un)make worlds*”.

CIRCLES OF DEATHS - (DAY 1)

I enter a circle without knowing it had already swallowed me. I sit on the stage of Beurscafé, waiting for the tale to be activated. I recognize familiar faces. They gather in whispers, fragmented smiles, eyes wandering, searching for solace; a way to envelop. For a second, it feels like we're attending a funeral. And we are. As we are gathering, genocides are perpetrated and fascist narratives prevail. The very property of a circle is, by nature, a demarcation between the inside and the outside, who it allows in and who it excludes, its fiction and its reality. Elisa Liepsch and Sofia Dati begin by stretching our circle to the very edges of its possibility. This program is an attempt to construct a concrete fabula in solidarity with Gaza, Rafah, Kivu, Sudan and all the places facing ongoing genocides.

From where I'm located in the circle, I can only see the backs of Costanza Spina and Talu. They are in the heart of our circle ready to give it a pulsation. Costanza explains that the death of a dictator doesn't kill the ideas they birthed. From death grows the venom. This pervasive ability of ideas to contaminate, outgrows their destinies. Mussolini's death didn't stop fascism from spreading, remaining a new form, a shapeshifting enemy whose discourse still penetrates the decorum we inhabit. We are facing unbearable hauntings.

¹ <https://www.beursschouwburg.be/en/events/opera-infinita-1/>

On the top of a paper abandoned next to me, I notice a sentence written in ecstatic blue: “*The Fight Begins In the Imagination*”²; Costanza evokes the need to create strong visions. We ought to desire the fight. Envision it. Costanza points out that desire is etymologically linked with *desiderare*, the act of “*getting out of astonishment*”, away from the numbness of necropolitics. Invent the stories that could save us from poisonous ends. We talk about “*Radical municipalities*”. I interpret them as shelters, intersectional networks of solidarities carved within and against kingdoms of violences. As Talu enumerates local initiatives, I think about all the tenderness I received in Brussels. How my loneliness excluded me for so long before I found a way towards a community’s embrace.

To unroot the heritage of death, soto labor and najjim bigou-fathi propose to explore tools of radical pedagogies. They had invited Manel Ben Boubaker and Dénètem Touam Bona. Manel talks about her *praxis* (research and action) with her students in Seine-Saint-Denis. How she works to get them out of the ineffable. She remembers one of them asking “*Why is Africa so poor?*” and the necessity to find an answer, to transmit the tools to dismantle the programmed curse of failures. Break the silence of the history in French school books. Dénètem says there is no pedagogy without the *lieu*. How pedagogies emanate from context and constraints. He references *Mangrove School*, a film by Sónia Vaz Borges and Filipa César that is looping in the Cinema, and that depicts a school amongst a forest of mangroves. We see students studying by the means of the mangrove. Rooting themselves to its alternative. I think this would have been Edouard Glissant's favorite place to teach.

I’ve never dreamt with my skin. Entering Myriam Lefkowitz’s *How Can One Know In Such Darkness?* I am petrified. I wonder if I’ll surrender to the process. If my body will accept this ritual. We take the elevator and wait for the performance to begin. The Silver Space is turned into a void. Someone approaches me, takes my hand and makes me see. I sink back into my *lieu* without beginnings nor endings, thinking about:

How the ruins of French imperialism were in every shadow of Bamako.

How a ruin is an artifact still alive, still condemning. Like the skin.

How I could not erase the name of Gallieni from my street.

When my shame devoured me from inside out.

The way everybody thinks I’m French, while I only learnt to master the accent of violence.

How I wished a teacher like Manel would have taught me otherwise.

How there is only beauty without translation.

How there is no future without the liberation of Palestine.

The way people like to talk about fascism without having experienced its aftermath.

How living in the margins of the world made me feel out of touch.

How I was craving for more than what I was offered without knowing it was already enough.

A memory comes back, one day after high school, I went alone to the beach. I drew a big circle on the sand and placed my body in the middle of its mouth. I was waiting for a wave to erase me, waiting to be in the center of oblivion; “*Maybe it’s from the margins that we understand what is the center, his belly*” - Dénètem’s words echo and bring me back; out of touch.

Before leaving the first night of the programme, I introduce myself to one of the visiting artists. I ask him how he feels about Brussels. He tells me he couldn’t leave the building. All he could see behind the gold of this city was flesh and blood.

² Costanza explains the sentence belongs to Clémentine Labrosse from Censored Magazine.

MIRRORING AS NEW WAY OF SEEING - (DAY 2)

I cannot see, so I lend my eyes to yesterday's prophecy. The vision opens the flesh and commands a bloodstain without borders. It pours everywhere, expanding the night and overflowing the Golden Space. Mlondiwethu Dubazane breaks his self. He opens up into words, *intone* shaping the sounds of his world. "A prayer for sound", he repeats. The charm infused allows me to forget the sentences in the air. As I lay down in red, I abandon myself. I separate words from the ground and I don't know if I'll ever land. Gravity takes another flux in *Station SAADA* - two figures mirror each other. Frantz Fanon and Elsa Dorlin. Lucile Saada Choquet places them on the same bookshelf and makes us see how they complete each other. She talks about how the omissions of one, made the other possible. She navigates her first reads, reflecting on how thinking from the black experience as the core of things changed her, helped her embody a better hunger and in return create tales: "I needed to have a body, to stop making it die and to connect with other people". I remember the first time I met her. I sat on her bed in *Jusque dans nos lits*³. We echoed each other; her words poured down her mouth and eased a wound that will never heal. She offered a moment of trembling, a wander into the galaxies of our shared blackness. As in orbit; alike yet absolutely divergent. A repaired reflection.

The night ends as it began. I fade into *ABISSAL* as if I had never left *intone*. The first breaching through the reflection of the other. As I dive deeper into Panamby's performance, the simulacrum crumbles, we collectively stop being:

A face suspended in time shimmers
with dread. And the night forgets it twinkles to split

rage in two figures: the past
& the perpetuated. Empires fade

Into night's burn. Sirens won't stop
harassing their hunters.

Teardrops drop
and dropped

slowly almost
impossibly;

(I feel a dream within a wake)
— a detonation

like a forest growing inwards
So alive, so degraded

The outside breaking in,
The belly of a beast.

The apocalypse untorn.

³ <https://varia.be/programme/lucile-saada-choquet/jusque-dans-nos-lits>

BURNING MEMORIES - (DAY 3)

"Place as possibility" is how Shayma Nader introduced her writing workshop quoting the Palestinian author Hussein Barghouti. She asks us to write a memory out of a place, a time, and reignite its possibilities. We collectively rewrite our texts with the words of others. Netting our memories together. Creating an everlasting collective tale. What if x happened? What if x didn't? The possibilities are boundless. Later on, we gathered to share a meal. Shayma remembers how her family in Palestine found their way in the mountains, how the map is woven into their bodies and passed on, generation after generation. How your land is forever yours. You just have to close your eyes, resurrect it, conjure the landscape in you. We are carrying fragments of our homelands with us like pieces of dreams.

We leave the homeland in the film *Segunda persona, tercera persona (part 1)*; landscapes of violence are merging into a map of urban France. It is the bureaucratic inferno and its mechanisms that we are brought to pierce. How deep can a question cut? The narrator, like the system they embody, are invisible. They scheme through the intimacy of the interviewee, berefting them from individuality, from choosing a face. We talk about Western states and exclusionary narratives. The way a frontier is a fascist and colonial construction and how the West disguises its maneuvers to erect. Sowmya Maheswaran joins the conversation on video with filmmaker Alex Reynolds. She invokes the need to search for the *"Undercommons inside our bodies"*. This black art of fugitivity as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten would put it. It is not a romanticization of struggles, the realities of borders, the violence retaliating, but an invitation to perceive fugitivity as a right, an escape to freedom.

until the last morning, is how I wish to end the program. I want to connect back to Jota's visions. In her short film, clouds are drowning in the sky. They are sketching another destiny while they agonize. It's as if we had access to the planet's fever. The use of sepia brings her images to the verge of burning. And if we look closer, we're witnessing their ignitions. The way candles burn best a few seconds before choosing bliss. An orchestrated afterglow. As the film develops, I think about how Westerners could never survive the heat that forged us. Anti Ribeiro's composition elevates the postcard-skies to the highest seas. Watching Jota's work, I dive back into *opera infinita* as if the performance was contained in all her vowels, as if I could share my vow again. And I do, I whisper it like an oath. She repeats *"In the face of the ongoing, of a certain death"*, not willing to give more answers. There is a rainbow in the sky.

EPILOGUE - THE BEGINNING

After the closing, Sofia gives me a bouquet of flowers saved from the waste. I meet Alex Reynolds as we're heading out, she takes a picture of me holding them. I say goodbye and I feel like I'm carrying a portion of Spring in my hands. I think about the fact that Spring is coming, it is already everywhere. I have known about 8 of them since I arrived in Belgium. I remember how for the longest it felt like there were only two seasons: yesterday and tomorrow.

I pass in front of Beurs one last time, waving goodbye to the watermelon flags. I think about this vow I made, never accomplished, never made possible outside theaters. How we will never know the way. As I head home, the last line of a poem by Mahmoud Darwich emerges:

“So I say: I’m missing the beginning, what’s the beginning?”⁴

The beginning is our night:

this

culminating

gesture

towards

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⁴ Mahmoud Darwish, "I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater", in: *The Butterfly's Burden* (2008), Copper Canyon Press. English translation by Fady Joudah.