CRITICAL STAGES
EDITED BY MIKE SELL

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GRAMMAR & GHOSTS: THE PERFORMATIVE LIMITS OF AFRICAN FREEDOM

When a group comprised primarily of African-derived "people"—yes, the scare quotes matter—gather at the intersection of performance and subjectivity, the result is often not a renewed commitment to practice or an explicit ensemble of questions, but rather a palpable structure of feeling, a shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture. This structure of feeling is palpable even in the place-names "Africa" and "the Caribbean," names whose articulation (grammar) and memory (ghosts) would not be names at all were it not for the trade in human cargo. The promise of *sense* and *meaning*, when these place-names are spoken, is imbricated in the syntax and morphology of structural violence. Isolation of its performative and episodic instances (the violent event) often robs us of our ability to see it as a grammar of emergence and being: the Maafa, or African Holocaust, as the condition for the emergence of African being, just as grammar conditions the emergence of speech. We know the apparitions: ghosts of lost ancestors whom Ghanaians

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mourn each year at the sea when they mark the Maafa on their side of the Atlantic; the strange surnames on this side, haunted by the memory of names unknown; that empty space between children and their grandparents where the scourge of AIDS walks in silence; civil wars and famines induced by "natural" disasters like World Bank policies and U.S. intervention—one need not name each and every ghost to remind oneself of their omnipresence.

No other place-names depend upon such violence. No other nouns owe their integrity to this semiotics of death. Meditations on African performance and subjectivity are always already spoken by this grammar and haunted by these ghosts. For whatever "Africa" means when spoken by Africans, whatever it means in the moment of performance, that cannot change Africa's paradigmatic relation to other place-names and the people of those places. Performance cannot reconcile this gap between the place of slaves and the places of all others.

For me, the most striking thing about any gathering of people that interprets art through the African diaspora is the force with which this grammar and these ghosts irrupt within and at the margins of the proceedings. But their force is no guarantor of clarity. It is often unspoken, like grammar, or without verifiable substance, like ghosts. The harvest can be as mystifying as it is clarifying.

The Conference on African and Afro-Caribbean Performance was no exception. Thoughtfully organized and deftly executed by Professors Catherine Cole of UC Berkeley and Leo Cabranes-Grant of UC Santa Barbara, it was held during 26–28 September 2008 at UC Berkeley and assembled an impressive array of scholars and performance artists from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States who participated in panel discussions, a film screening, performances, and readings on dance, drama, community theatre, the links between social justice and performance, rituals, religious events, diasporas, carnival, and intercultural barterings. These included notable scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sandra Richards, Gerard Aching, Tejumola Olaniyan, and internationally acclaimed performance artists like Alseny Soumah of *Les Ballets African* (who led a workshop on West African dance), South African actress and opera singer Pauline Malefane (Carmen in *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha*, a modern-day version of Bizet's opera filmed and set in Cape Town's Khayelitsha township and screened at the conference), and master *kamele ngoni*[1] player Mamadou Sidibe (acclaimed for his transformation of Malian hunters' sacred melodies into a music of philosophical observation and political reflection). The presence of such notables did not crowd out papers and presentations by graduate students and lesser-known academics. This speaks to the conference's spirit of inclusion and the democratic impulse through which it was conceived and organized. When it concluded, ten members of the University of California Multicampus Research Group (MRG) on International Performance and Culture met to reflect upon and critique not only the conference but also three articles proposed for this edition of *Theatre Survey*.[2] This column is a hybrid offering of notes from the MRG session and my own assessment of the ensemble of questions raised by the conference.

Members of the MRG appreciated how the sweeping generalizations that have smothered many a conference were checked by thick description and microanalysis, as in Gerard Aching's keynote, "At the Threshold of Visibility:

Liberalism and Populism in Trinidad Carnival," in which he meditated on a ten-second video clip that began with an erotic dance encounter (aka "winding") between two black Trinidadian men during Carnival, and ended with shots of the spontaneous, homophobic gestures of passersby. Aching's illustration of the irreconcilability between a dance encounter that is "normally" the purview of an individual reveler or heterosexual couple and prevailing notions of freedom that cannot accommodate the act of "deliberately calling attention to oneself as a scandalizing subject at carnival" did more than describe the encounter and catalog reactions. It juxtaposed ethnographic and historical knowledge about Trinidad's struggle against Western imperialism with a critique of intrablack social and political strategies to protest and disable marginalization. It differed from many of the papers and presentations in its explicit attempt to stage a relay between the singularity of a moment of performance and a larger conceptual framework or ensemble of questions. MRG members noted that this absence of articulation on the part of many other papers was a problem. But, having expressed our desire for there to have been "more theory," we found ourselves turned back on the question, *whose theory*?—which is to say, what constitutes rigor, knowledge, and value, and can these questions ever be divorced from the *force* of the grammar and ghosts which converge whenever "Africa" is spoken?

A major conceptual framework that underwrote the conference was "diaspora," so much so that a plenary panel and a roundtable were devoted to it. The conviction with which the concepts of diaspora and performance were sutured evinced a collective belief in the analytic integrity of this suture and a collective faith in the promise it holds for social change. A related theme of the conference was the impact of specific performances as sites of and strategies for local resistance. This included papers on the AIDS pandemic and community-based theatre; the politics of contemporary African performance in the United Kingdom; theatre as a mode of intervention in postelection, violence-torn Nairobi; dance and the representation of intra-African genocide; performers who refused to play Sun City during apartheid; and the transformative power of graffiti in the slums of Dakar.

The conference was seeking, not always explicitly, not always consciously, the grammar with which to address the ghosts that haunted it. But all too often it was seduced by an overvaluation of performance art's sociopolitical effectiveness. Having delineated the methods, syntax, and social context of a given performance or performance practice, a speaker would make a leap of faith and assert a causal link between the performance and the emancipation of the black people who produced and consumed it—as though art was the very essence of, rather than an accompaniment to, structural change. Such assertions were typically hobbled by a mix of rhetorical registers, one analytic, the other sentimental—with the sentimental register going unacknowledged as such, and often hastily tagged on at the end of a paper or conversation. This substitution of sentiment for analysis mystifies instead of clarifies the grammar and ghosts of Africa's structural violence, a structural violence that is not analogous to that of Asians, working-class Europeans, or Latinos. Attention to it problematizes the articulation between performance and emancipation.

This easy, largely intuitive articulation of performance and emancipation was also manifest in the declarations of performers themselves. On several occasions, artists declared that they wanted to be known simply as artists and not as Africans or black artists. As with any demand that is charged with high emotion, this one was not always made with rhetorical scaffolding and extended explanation—in part, because such statements were often made during Q & A sessions or in the buzz between sessions. As a critical theorist, it would be easy for me to deconstruct these cries and demonstrate their dependency on outdated notions of a unitary self. Freud and Marx, to name but two, have long ago compelled us to come to grips with the partitioned "nature" of our existence. And Lacan pushed the prospects of self-knowing beyond hope of retrieval with his assertion that "the wall of language" guarantees our capacity for relationality while simultaneously severing us from the Real. There is no self to be known; hence, there is no artist whose status is free of the "taint" of race and place.

But if we think of this demand not as a wish to disavow relationality, but as a wish to be *imbued* with relationality, then something else emerges. Freud, Marx, and Lacan's subjects don't suffer from the violence of enslavement, which is an explicit interdiction against relationality; they suffer from having imbibed the mystifications of the ruling class (Marx), the ego (Freud), or the Imaginary (Lacan). There was something in the force of the performance artists' cry just to be artists that resonated with the force that first turned subjects into cargo. Lest we think that this force is merely the grammar and ghosts of blacks in the "New" World, that somehow Africans of the twentieth and twenty-first century have an altogether different rebar of ontology, we should note Achille Mbembe's argument that, once Hegel (as a placeholder for all the punishing discourse of the Maafa, or African Holocaust) renders Africa "*territorium nullius*," "the land of motionless substance and of the blinding, joyful, and tragic disorder of creation," even the African who was not captured was a slave in relation to the rest of the world, his or her freedom from chains and distance from the Middle Passage notwithstanding.[3] Though this "free" African may know him/herself through coherent cultural accoutrements unavailable to the black American or black Caribbean, s/he is positioned, paradigmatically, as someone unable to "attain[ ] to immanent differentiation or to the clarity of self-knowledge."[4] S/he is recast as an object in a world of subjects. "Even the status of free blacks," Saidiya Hartman argues, is "shaped and compromised by . . . slavery."[5]

Here, the prohibition against attaining differentiation or self-knowledge rests, in the first ontological instance, with a structural violence that removes black "people" from the world. The cry to be known and appreciated as an artist and not as an "African" or "black" artist operates on several levels, but the most profound recognizes (if only intuitively or unconsciously) the damage of being marked as such, not in the sense of a compromised artistic status, but a compromised existential status. The cry is not the effect of a neurotic complex that refuses to live in a deconstructive relation to the ego; it is a narrative strategy hoping to slip the noose of a life shaped and compromised by slavery. No other gathering of artists and critics is overdetermined by this dilemma. No slavery, no diaspora. No diaspora, no conference. Such gatherings are always haunted by a

shared sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture. This is where performance meets ontology. But all too often, such meetings take place not on a well-lit stage, but in a fog.

Perhaps the fog is unavoidable. Grammar and ghosts are rarely the subject of direct reflection. How often does one speak one's grammar; how often does one touch a ghost? One night at the conference, Pauline Malefane told two members of the MRG, Professors Sue-Ellen Case and Susan Foster of UCLA, that she had wanted, in respect to her performance, more discussion of the conditions of poverty and violence that she and others like her experienced at the hands of the apartheid government and at the hands of African men whose domestic abuse made African women the scapegoats for their social and political detumescence. To this day, 150 women are raped each day in South Africa. The next night, however, she cut MRG member Leo Cabranes-Grant short when he tried to raise these issues with her. We've discussed all of that, she seemed to be saying; I want you to tell me what you think of me as a singer, what you thought of my performance *as performance*, not as an "African" performance.

Other performance artists were equally adamant in their demand: "Don't define me, I'll label myself." To which some scholars responded, "Well, that's not political enough." And the rejoinder from the performance artists: "The most political thing you can do is define yourself." The artists' demand *is* political, but I locate the politics not in the *content* of the demand (a cry for autonomy), but in the *context* of its enunciation: the structural violence of a life positioned, paradigmatically, as an object in a world of subjects—a Blackened life. It is not that one must gain recognition as an artist, but that one must shake free of niggerization.

The difference between a sentient being who is positioned as a *being in the world* and one who is positioned as a *thing of the world* marks every scale, from the body to the diaspora. The raison d'être of the conference was the idea that diaspora trumps the nation-state as a model for thinking cultural, political, and racial formations, and is, thus, more effective than an area-studies model because it subverts the conceptual framework of the nation or the region and allows for things like language and migration to function as the privileged schema of interpretation. I am not as smitten by the diaspora model's explanatory power as some of my MRG colleagues and many people at the conference were. The agential optimism that renders language and migration essential, as opposed to important, elements in the analysis of performance and global blackness assumes a grammatical analogy among diasporas, assumes that they are all haunted by similar ghosts.[6]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines diaspora as "the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland" and as "people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland."[7] But the word "homeland" cannot be reconciled with Africa, though many of the presenters at the conference might disagree with me. To begin with, "homeland" implies a cartographic scale much smaller and more intimate than a continent. But what is most problematic about the term "diaspora" when applied to African-derived "people" is its grammatical coupling of noun and possessive pronoun—"their homeland"—or of noun, possessive pronoun, and adjective—"their original homeland." The viability of such grammatical entities falters in the face of Africa, because "Africa" is a

shorthand term for technologies of force that rob possessive pronouns and place-names of their integrity. This contradictory coupling and faltering is the diachronic and synchronic effect of violent projections from the outside.

The one definitional element of diaspora that can be applied to African-derived "people" and not forfeit its integrity is dispersal, though not in the spirit proffered by the *OED*. That is because the logic of the *OED*'s "dispersal" follows the logic of classical narrative: equilibrium (the time and place of the homeland, in which narrative stability is established), followed by disequilibrium (the climax of dispersal), ending with equilibrium (the denouement of cultural recuperation). The syntax of this narrative strategy (equilibrium, disequilibrium, equilibrium) is imbricated with the imaginings of diaspora apparent in the conference papers and conversations. It's what makes the word "diaspora" analogous to, and translatable among, races and cultures. But this analogy is a ruse when applied to Africa. Africa, as a conceptual framework, was never the place and time of equilibrium, nor is it today, and the conference bore this out. But it did so symptomatically and anecdotally, and in wholly unintended service to the point I am making.

Such narrative progression affords the definition of diaspora its spine of coherence. But Africa, as a place-name and conceptual framework, does not possess a temporality prior to what, for all other diasporas, is the *second* moment in narrative progression—its ontological emergence is coterminous with disequilibrium. Prior to the invasion of Arab slavers, colonizers, and Europeans, a three-point pilgrim's progress might have cohered. But though the same tree grows in the same soil, the place of that narrative coherence and integrity was not Africa, and the people of that equilibrium are not the "people" of Africa. "African diaspora" is an oxymoron, because the idea of dispersal from a prior plenitude is only a dream. This is the problem that performance studies has yet to work through: How, or more to the point, why does one perform in and for a world that has forced upon one cartographic and temporal injunctions that are always already operative at every scale, from the body to the village to the nation to the continent to the diaspora? Who is served by this smooth analogy to "others," this easy grammatical join of art and liberation?

Whereas the force of this injunction registered in the cries for definitional autonomy and in the many conference speakers' elaboration of the violent and coerced contexts in which black performance is conceived, staged, and consumed, it may have resulted in one clarifying step forward and two mystifying steps backward. And the success in displacing an area-studies model with a diasporic model may have been equally effective in displacing (and postponing) a vital interrogation of the terms upon which the conference was convened.

ENDNOTES

    1. A six-string harp, from the Wassoulou region of southern Mali.

    2. Leo Cabranes-Grant, Lynette Hunter, Peter Lichtenfels, Patrick Anderson, Susan Foster, Sue-Ellen Case, Daphne Lei, Shannon Steen, Simon Williams, and myself. Mike Sell, the editor of this column, was on hand as a facilitator, guide, and participant.

3. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 183, 176.

4. Ibid., 173.

5. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

6. Special thanks to Professor Jared Sexton and the late Professor Lindon Barrett of UC Irvine for their insights regarding conceptual problems inherent in the term "African diaspora."

7. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 397.