Performance in Caribbean and African Literatures as Subversion of the Colonial Order

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In the past oral Caribbean and African cultures, performances by the “griots” reminded the community of its heroic past. In colonial studies, performance is a way for the colonized people to reconnect with its original soul and language and to become magnificent of creativity like the storyteller Solibo in Chamoiseau’s Solibo Magnifique (Caribbean).

In Chamoiseau’s novel, the Black policemen who came to investigate on Solibo’s sudden death during the performance look grotesque. They mimic the French colonizers with their “bâton” and their racism at thinking evil of the Black community and they provoke laughter. Mimicry and the irony it conveys, subverts the formerly ironclad authority of the colonial order (Homi K. Bhabha in Location of Culture).

The Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking-Gnépo also warns the Africans of the danger of wearing the White Mask of the colonizers (like Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks). She demonstrates in her Song/Novel She will be of Jasper and Coral, that while the African Mask empowers the performer of metaphysical powers, the White Mask of colonialism on the contrary weakens the performer who internalizes his inferiority and becomes complicit of his subjugation. Fortunately, Werewere Liking-Gnépo shows that the White Mask of colonialism can be used to mimic the harshness and corruption of the Colonial order and in doing so to bring back regeneration of Africa.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, African Literature, illocutory and kinetic forces of a performance (dance, story-telling), conversion of performances into literature, colonialism, subversion of colonialism, Fanon, Chamoiseau, Werewere Liking-Gnépo, Bhabha, the Colonizer and the Colonized, redefinition of the colonized’s personhood

Performance events are pervasive in Caribbean and African literatures when we read passages in the novels representing storytelling and dance gatherings written in an oral form like in Solibo Magnifique (Solibo Magnificent) by Chamoiseau (1988) or a kinetic form of the mind/body in Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail (It Shall Be of Jasper and Coral) by Liking (1983).

Unlike the written word, performances have an illocutionary force, a dynamic relationship between the audience member and the performer and have the power to move the audience towards a transformation of these communities still burdened by the colonial past which are represented in these novels.
The best definition of the word “performance” could be taken from Solibo himself in the novel by Chamoiseau *Solibo Magnifique*. Solibo addresses Chamoiseau and tells him:

> Oiseau de Cham, you write. Very nice. I, Solibo, I speak. You see the distance? In your book on the watermama, you want to capture the word in your writing, I see the rhythm you try to put into it, how you grab words so they ring in the mouth. You say to me: Am I doing the right thing, Papa? Me, I say: One writes with words, not the word we should have spoken. To write is to take the conch out of the sea to shout here’s the conch! The word replies: where’s the sea? But that’s not the most important thing. I’m going and you are staying. I spoke but you, you’re writing, announcing that you come from the word. You give me your hand over the distance. It’s all very nice, but you just touch the distance. (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 28)

Solibo evokes the problem of converting performances into literature. A writer has to follow a logical path of reasoning when writing a novel and he has to start from the origins “the sea” so that the reader would be able to follow his discourse. The storyteller on the contrary does not give explanations about the words he speaks. These words he speaks are understood by the audience who partakes of the same location and time of elocution than him. Much of the meaning in storytelling is conveyed by the illocutionary force of the words of the elocutor.

We see in Chamoiseau’s novel that unlike the “griots” who were educated historian/story tellers who were in charge of reminding the community of its hierarchy, and the heroic past of some families, the performance of storytelling in *Solibo Magnifique* is performed by Solibo, himself a “solibo” from Guadeloupe, which in the Caribbean language means “a destitute man, a fallen man”. He is dressed in a garish way but despite his poverty, he is magnificent of creativity. He can attract an audience around him and hold the attention of his auditors and have them take charge of his stories by acknowledging that they understand what he is saying and what he is implying also.

In doing so, he can orient his audience towards action. Here is a description of Solibo’s magnificence as well physically as in his art of story telling:

> His white nylon shirt bore gold cufflinks, yes, and silver sleeve-tighteners. His pants, worn to death, fell neatly on his varnished boots: ah, Solibo had really earned his name’s other half! ... He lifted his little hat to greet the audience: Ladies and gentlemen if I say good evening it’s because it isn’t day and if I don’t say good night it’s the cause of which the night will be white tonight like a scrawny pig on his bad day at the market and even whiter than a sunless béké under his take-a-stroll umbrella in the middle of a cane-field é krii?...

> E kraa! The company replied. (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 13)

Solibo maintains the attention of the audience during this whole Carnival night telling the audience of the injustice of Africa (represented in his speech by Congo) still under the rule of the békés (the White men) after the Independence and making the Black people toil in the fields and not giving them any opportunity because if there had been any opportunity Solibo would have gone on it. He says:

> if there was a path even a tiny bit of path within another tiny bit of path I would have already tramped on it for myself I Solibo who speaks to you here standing as badly on his earth as on one wave… (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 164)

And Solibo continues his speech on the corruption of the Blacks by the Whites in Africa “Hortense dances up some intrigue-pretense” (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 164) and Solibo to say that in this night of Carnival the colonial order is going to be perverted: It is not the Blacks who will dance under the whip of the colons and be abused but the Whites: “Hortense dances up some intrigue-pretense but around here not one half man will dance
this evening because the night will be white to listen you gotta wait wait n’ figure… (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 165) and Solibo is going to say all that he thinks about the Whites. And he continues to say that the Whites have destroyed the unity of Africa by imposing the colonial order and its submission to its religion and created two groups, the illiterate group which took refuge in “la montagne Vauclin” and continued to live according to its African traditions under the hardship of the colonial order and the other literate group which submitted to the Whites and their White language and traditions is not granted the right to express their minds:

kongo standing in the grass under the ca ne don’t understand the A.B.C.D… has l ugged his body up the peak of that mountain and begins to tame a life with no chains no békés no bruptes no whips… while us black men with the A.B.C.D. … and I myself Solibo who can talk in the mouth and yell Vive de Gaulle on July 14… but I I I Solibo you say that I am magnificent but if I am magnificent what have I got to say and who told me to say it? (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 165)

Surprisingly, his speech (the oral performance), the content describing the repression of the colonial order is not what the novel is about because it is placed in the annex. The whole novel is about Solibo’s death while talking to his audience, a death that Congo describes in these terms: “Ladies and gentlemen, Solibo Magnificent is dead snickt (snitched) by the word” (Chamoiseau, 1988, p. 20).

Solibo’s last breath sets his audience into motion.

Solibo’s magnificence is not so much in his elocution, in his story but in the illocutory force of his elocution, meaning what Solibo, the locutor, could convey to his audience, and what he could lead them to do. After hearing Solibo’s speech, a fishmonger Doudou-Ménar is propulsed to report Solibo’s death to the police and darts towards the police station while the others try all their science to reanimate Solibo. The art of Solibo and the magnificence of his Performance is that illocutory force that he puts in the words that made his Black fellows in the audience take charge of the situation instead of waiting for the colonizers to deal with the case.

The precipitation and trepidation of the audience at saving Solibo can be compared to the dance that Fanon describes in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon explains that the colonized people need performance events to manage the muscular tensions that result from their unfulfilled desire in the colonial order.

On another level we see the native’s emotional sensibility exhausting itself in dances which are more or less ecstatic. This is why any study of the colonial world should take into consideration the phenomena of the dance and of possession. The native’s relaxation takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressiveness and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed and conjured away. The circle of the dance is a permissive circle; it protects and permits. At certain times on certain days, men and women come together at a given place, and there, under the solemn eye of the tribe, fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic, in which by various means, shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing of the whole body backward—may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. There are no limits inside the circle. The hillock up which you have toiled as if to be nearer to the moon, the river bank down which you slip as if to show a connection between the dance and ablutions, cleansing and purification-these are sacred places. There are no limits—for in reality your purpose in coming together is to allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressiveness, to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption. (Fanon, 1968, p. 57)

The frenzy of Solibo’s friends at his death breaks from the normal way of life of submission of the Blacks to the colonial order. Doudou-Ménar gets consciousness of the Blacks having the same right as the Whites and wants Solibo’s strangulation to be taken into consideration. She is assertive in front of the policeman on call at the front desk Justin Philibon and although the policeman does not take her request seriously she insists that he asks
for a doctor. Policemen come in to help their colleague Justin with the authoritative request from Doudou-Ménar, and manoeuvre to control her but she perceives their intention and assaults them.

Law! Call a doctor, there’s Solibo fighting an evil spell in the Savanna… you hear me, Law?... Strengthened by his six years of experience, by his certificate of technical capacity... Justin Philibon... darted at Doudou-Ménar the look he thought to be justice. … At that instant in the police station … silent slow men lined up behind… Justin Philibon, others discreetly obstructed the exit and marked Doudou-Ménar as if she were a soccer forward. The big woman noticed the manoeuvre, but instead of sanely freaking out, she seemed to take a strange pleasure in it… She was already regarding the policemen with eyes clotted with hatred… she shone like a tree stripped of its bark. …The lawmen are clawed by this audacity…Justin Philibon throws a jab to the left arm of the Tigress. He has done it before, that move is infallible. But! The big street vendor looses the vitality of a yellow snake from her curves. Justin Philibon looks as pitiful as a penitent taking the holy wafer. His forearms are held, bent to the point of snapping, a sovereign strength lifts him and whirls him like in a hallucination, inches from the ceiling. Then and there comes the assault! Doudou-Ménar climbs on top of the counter. Her legs tortured by varicose veins, she soon crashes on the police pack. Her breasts come down more destructive than sacks of gravel. Notebooks, watches, teeth, pens, typewriter fly.  … Seven ten are knocked against each other, like calabashes in a basket... the lawmen vainly apply their murderous techniques against her fortified-with-yam-and-hard-cabbage fat. Forty years of ill-luck have solidified her muscles, seasoned her pugnacity, and, in the hot pincers of her arms or teeth, the suddenly limp police horde perceives the murderous intent of a resentment that knows no horizon. (Fanon, 1968, p. 27)

In that dance-assault, Doudou-Ménar investigates her body. She sees herself encircled by the policemen and instead of submitting her body to their aggression and letting herself be beaten up, by policemen she takes the lead and decides to beat them up herself. Doudou-Ménar practices a social transformation. She breaks her bondage against the colonial order (the policemen); she emancipates herself, possesses herself, and becomes a snake spirit of muscular prowess.

Like in Carnival, social order is perverted and the colonized people, the common people like Doudou-Ménar, a saleswoman at the market, kick the butt of the Colonizer.

Suddenly, she attracts the attention of the chief of police Bouaffesse working next door.

“From his desk where he was questioning three rastas… Chief Sergeant Philémon Bouaffesse had heard a fishmarket-around-a quarter-to-noon kind of uproar” (Fanon, 1968, p. 28).

As Fanon explains in his novel The Wretched of the Earth, the dance circle has the privilege to engage all the participants in the dance, the ones inside the circle of the dance like Doudou-Ménar as well as the ones outside the circle just listening in the audience like the chief of police. The participants in the dance are not segregated into fixed roles. We do not see the colonized people dancing and gesticulating under the whip of the colonizers standing and watching the dance, but on the contrary, both the roles of the dancers and the gazers are permutable. Both groups dance and watch in turn. And this permutation of the roles of dancers and gazers, of Blacks and Whites re-defines the personhood of the Black woman Doudou-Ménar. In that enlarged dance-circle including the chief of police, she challenges the definition of her personhood. The chief of police Philémon Bouaffesse who first thought that the disturbance was the brawl of a saleswoman from the fish market reconsiders the request when he encounters the woman. Doudou-Ménar articulates her individuality in front of the chief of police. She technically claims herself and reminds the chief of police of another dance that they performed when they were young lovers. She “franchises herself” and “says herself”. She recognizes the chief of police as her former lover.
You do not recognize me Philémon… Oh, painful sudden recollection! Despite himself, the Chief Sergeant had to arch an eyebrow and force a smile: Holyshit! It’s Lolita, he thought.

The night of his meeting with the young Lolita Boidevan rushed back to his memory. At the time a simple guardian of the peace, he… haunted the feminine fishponds of small parties, balls, and other events where the juices flowed. This particular night, he had chosen La Bananeraie… when an accessible creature appeared. … a refreshing face with big innocent eyes that a drifting kalior could not ignore. The young Bouaffesse invited the young girl whose name he would soon learn was Lolita Boidevan, not knowing that a few years later she would be named Doudou-Ménar, a major trouble maker in Fort-de-France. (Fanon, 1968, pp. 34-35)

That present dance with her ex-lover at the police station is suspended in time and lets another memory of another dance that happened years before invaded the temporal space. In that recollection of his first dance with Lolita/ Doudou-Ménar, the policeman rewrites history supplementing it by all that had been silenced within him by the colonial order. He remembers his attraction to this Black woman:

The young Bouaffesse began as planned, brushing against her belly, tipping the Beauty, his forearms tight around her waist. The tipping part is crucial, at the end, it delivers the coveted woman to the artiste. Bouaffesse respectably tipped her, two seconds before the end of the piece… and thus could, without frightening his prey, gyrate his hips in the sexiest way… The Beauty was consumed in an air-conditioned Citroën, to the rhythm of a slow Otis Redding tune… by the seaside. (Fanon, 1968, p. 34)

Little by little, Bouaffessere collects the features of her young lover under the apocalypting silhouette of Doudou-Ménar. Memory superposes to the present day situation and suddenly the colonial order is subverted. Doudou-Ménar, the Black woman from the market gets out of Bouaffesse’s office as white as snow and all legalized.

He examined Doudou-Ménar, looking under the puffed-up face for the curves of the young woman, and, detail by detail, Lolita took shape in front of him despite the apocalyptic evidence of her breasts, the waist, the muscled arm… I recognize you, Madame., join me in the office… It was the nocturnal habit of Bouaffesse to use his office for the impromptu consummation of his love affairs. … At the end of an eternity, Justin Philémon saw them coming out…with clothes too well adjusted and eyes gleaming. … Sitting in the back of the van with three policemen …heading towards Solibo… Doudou-Ménar is legalized and proud. (Fanon, 1968, p. 38)

Performance is also what defines Werewere Liking, born in 1950 into a family of musicians under the name of Eddie Nicole Njock, in the Bassa Village of Malack, in South Central Cameroon. By mid-1960s, she is already a mother of two, married to Alfred Liking and is a successful musician. Then she writes poems that she puts to music and frequents intellectuals like the French ethnologist Marie-José Hourantier from the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Then, Liking, dissatisfied with the widening gap between the university elite and their Western educational norms and the social reality of failure and delinquency of Abidjan’s young population, decides to leave the university and creates her own cultural center in Abidjan in 1983, the Ki-Yi M’Bock Village, which means the village of “the Ultimate Knowledge of the Universe” in Bassa language. She houses in her Ki-Yi Village 20 talented child-artists that she picks out of the Abidjan’s ghettos. These students had failed in the Western-style schooling of Abidjan and Werewere Liking thought that she could save these children from delinquency by giving them an instruction that would speak of their identity through a type of theater called ritual theater. This type of ritual theater raises questions like the question of the degeneration of Africa by the Europeans. She also raises this question in her 1983 groundbreaking novel Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail (It
Shall Be of Japer and Coral). She opens this novel by an apocalyptic picture of the immanent collapse of the African continent:

- False start in Africa
- Stranglehold in Africa
- Africa in Danger
- Africa Betrayed
- The Dumonts. The Duparcs. An other De Baleines…
- Titles. Names. Assessments. Prophesies…

Words that express a gangrenous Africa and foretell times when there will be nothing left to eat but migratory locusts, and that only in the good season!!! Words that express that colonized Africa never had a future and that independent Africa is going to die… and so on…and so forth… All that maybe well true. But there are other truths. Certainly… (Liking, 1983, p. 3)

In this apocalyptic pronouncement, she mimics the European verdict of the collapse of the Independence of Africa, called Lunaï in her dystopia.

Liking sees that the Africa of the Independence has been devoured by the European nations who have digested it and use it to fertilize their own western counties:

- We have been devoured by a monster. We are covered with slime inside the transparent entrails that grind us up knead us down. We are being digested in order to be fodder… for whom? We do not know… and as soon as thoughts like this become conscious ones in our bodies strangely softening saps spurt forth from our digestive system and extinguish thus and in a halo the intestines become the guts of Beaubourg: we are going to discover “Paris-Paris”… we have opted for evolution and we pass through the intestine so as to be digestedand to feed the regime that fights for us… We should be proud and die from hunger unutilized for Lunaï for Africa. (Liking, 1983, p. 33)

She explains that this second slavery situation has happened because the Africans have taken on the masks of the Europeans at the Independence and have become entrapped in financial dependency from the European banks.

- Europeans got rid of the African’s beliefs in the Ancestors and put Buddha, Christ and Muhammad to replace the ancestors. And put money before the heart and the individual and bought the soul of the Africans and that prayers would grant you everything … and all this has had repercussion all the way into the heads and the hearts into the dreams and the genes all on account of: the Tsetses… (Liking, 1983, p. 35)

The tsetse flies meaning the entrapment of the Africans even after the Independence to colonial patterns of inferiority, dependency, and passivity, have invaded their blood stream making the men of Lunaï complicit to their subjugation to the Europeans a second-time around. They are infected by this sleeping sickness caused by the tsetse flies and they do not seem to get out of their slumber. They do not think that they have a way out of this defeated Africa. They think that they are pawns that engender pawns and they do not think that they can get out of their desolate state.

At this state of stupor and wretchedness of her country, Liking decides to write a diary, the diary of a misovire, termed that she has taken from Latin and Greek roots to say the journal of a woman who hates the men of her country who have become zombies, and she decides to record the speech of these men in her diary and to display their carnival-like masking dance. Her diary is a way to set on stage the dance of these Lunaïan Black men with White Masks, to unmask them and to seek out again the vanquished Ancestor Masks of Wisdom and
Justice, of Hunt and War, of Satire and Civilization once sent by the god Hilolombi to initiate the African men back into wisdom.

She wants to show her African men that their true selves have been thrown off balance by the superposition unto themselves of the White Mask of the European colonizers. And she tells them that the best way for them to get rid of this alienation is to play it out in a kind of initiatory masked dance. In Liking’s text-game, the men are forced to dance possessed by the spiritual strength of the White Masks. It is a masquerade. The White Masks imposes their strength to Grozi and Babou and soon they are forced to talk and act like the Europeans do. Grozi and Babou realize then that they talk a phony language, repeating the words of the Europeans and accepting the series of negations about Africa and themselves: “Colonized Africa never did have a future and that independent Africa is going to die” (Liking, 1983, p. 3)… By hearing themselves saying these words, they feel upset.

The White Masks make them act like people who have lost their identity and display a bifurcated identity, a two-some dualistic/Manichean thinking. Grozi (the Black man) mimics the White man and dreams of talking with reason and science like the White Men and Babou (the White man) wants to embody the fantasy life and the Black Emotion of his Black cohabitants in Lunaï. Neither Grozi nor Babou are well in their own skins and want to take the skin of the other.

The benefit that Grozi and Babou get of being possessed by the White Masks and of enacting the White Mask dance is to be conscious of the shortcomings of the Westerners ideology, on Africa. They mimic the dance that the anglophone and francophone intellectuals impose on them in their heated debate on Negritude and they see that the Europeans only aim at dividing Africa.

The White Masks act as a mirror of the present and the Lunaïans having this reenactment played by themselves and before their own eyes are most likely prompted to revisit the White Masks’ statements. They believe that Africa should not do itself in by trying to prove itself with more neologisms restriction rifts/… that Africanity should no longer be a pretext for servitude/an alibi for ignorance weakness poverty the Sahel and that the model should no longer be Yankee/Nor negritude tigritude and other turpitudes. (Liking, 1983, p. 143)

Like the Ancestor Masks, the White Masks awakens these sleeping men of Lunaï, jolts them into reality, and makes them think at what the White Masks conceal, to divide Africa then to digest it and make them be fodder to fertilize their own countries.

Finally the un-masking of the White Masks is done. Babou recognizes that these White Masks are an obstacle at creating a new society in Africa. Originally, the Masks were an arbiter between the Gods and the men. The Gods would descend to the men in mediation of the Masks and would recreate and renew the world. Babou and Grozi realize that the White Masks do not serve that function anymore, meaning that Europeans do not help at recreating a beautiful Africa any longer. At this moment of awareness, Babou claims that the White Masks’ role is over. It has accomplished its civilization mission, lived its usefulness, and has become outmoded and the Lunaïans should not keep it anymore like a fetish. Babou realizes that the White Masks do not cause fear anymore as it used to do in Colonial Africa “We do not need the mask anymore! You’ve said it for yourself; the civilizing force has accomplished its mission so why should it become a fixture? Even the mask no longer causes fear in the kingdom of indifference?” (Liking, 1983, p. 75). These White Masks are “nothing more than an inefficient yoke,
an additional screen that keeps us from seeing…” (Liking, 1983, p. 74) and Babou advocates for their destruction in a fire. Grozi refuses this death by fire for the White Masks and he proposes a new role for the masks, the role of mimicry. Grozi says:

> We’ll accomplish the same thing without burning the mask, you’ll see/We’ll wear it on stage/We’ll magnify its fixed gaze/We’ll condemn the missionaries who establish themselves for their personal ends/We’ll unseat the technical assistants who refuse to be relieved/We’ll take apart the mechanism by which the Masks is manipulated/We’ll break the attitudes and gestures of those enslaved by the mask/We’ll design new masks on stage and have them into the theater/The oral and gesticulating clichés of the intellectuals, the businessmen, the technocrats, the executives, the politicians, the praying mantises, the termites/We’ll throw them out! (Liking, 1983, p. 76)

Like in a Carnival masquerade when adopting for a black person a White Mask costume was a way to mock at the master and emphasize his gestures and appearance, the White Mask dance in Werewere Liking’s theater will serve the same purpose of mimicry. The White Masks will not perfectly imitate the colons as they will have a fixed gaze and that fixed gaze will disrupt the authority of the colons as it will emphasize their intransigent positions in the colonial order.

Homi K. Bhabha explains in this book *The Location of Culture* that the colonial subjects are encouraged to imitate the culture and the trappings of their masters whose project is to impose on them the norms of their own culture. But this imitation is never accomplished; there is always a subtle difference which marks the colonial mimic as an imperfect incomplete representation. This mimicry of the master conveys irony and subverts its formerly ironclad authority.

The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I have described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. (…) But they are also… the figure of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as inappropriate colonial subjects. A desire that, through the repetition of partial presence which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reverses “in part” the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence: a gaze of otherness (…) (Bhabha, 1994, p. 88)

Werewere Liking’s art lies in the interstice between these two layers formed by the colonial master and the not so well represented copy of himself by the colonial subjects. It provokes writ and humor and de-dramatizes the consequences of colonialism.

The study of performance in the novels by Patrick Chamoiseau and Werewere Liking shows how social performance can function as a site for rehearsing self-possession. These texts examined here underscore the colonial ironclad authority, which has led to the protagonists’ exclusion of the body politic. These texts also highlight the distended time-space breaks when the exploited dehumanized protagonists are able to enact alternative social realities, subvert the colonial hierarchy, and refine their notion of personhood.

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