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How to Signify Otherness and Diasporic Bodies through Puppetry: Two Plays by Kossi Efoui

By Francesca Di Fazio

Abstract: Author of various theater plays, French-speaking writer of Togolese origin Kossi Efoui transfers in his texts, relying on the puppet's medium, his experience of political exile from his native country and statelessness, as well as search for an identity in his adoptive country, France. Reluctant to embrace a Western view that tends to relegate authors of African origins to an exotic aesthetic, Kossi Efoui puts a complex concept of identity at the center of his dramaturgy.

This chapter is centered on two different texts by Kossi Efoui, *Io (tragédie)* (2006) and *En guise de divertissement* (2013). The latter was conceived as a stage writing together with the puppet theater company Théâtre Inutile, during a collaboration lasting twenty years.

Analyzing the two texts, I aim to demonstrate how the basic themes of Efoui's dramaturgy—the trauma of exile and the expropriation, on the one hand, and the rehabilitation of a human feeling, of one's own history and identity, on the other—find their best concretization in the staging carried out with puppets.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, otherness, Postcolonialism—Africa, French-speaking

Kossi Efoui, a French-speaking playwright, novelist, and journalist of Togolese origin, is also the author of several plays for puppet theater. His interest in this type of art led him to establish a long-term collaboration, which has lasted for almost twenty years now, with the French company Théâtre Inutile, directed by Nicolas Saelens. Born in Togo in 1962, in the early 90s, Kossi Efoui took part in a non-violent movement against the regime of Étienne Eyadéma, because of which he had to escape from his country and, since then, he has been living in France. Thus, Kossi Efoui transfers in his texts, appealing to the puppet's medium, his experience of political exile from his native land, the quest for a new identity, and the condition of diasporic bodies.

In this chapter, I show, through an analysis of two plays written by Efoui, how the author has used the puppet as a medium to embody two variations of the condition of otherness based on his own experiences, giving rise to two ways, which are only apparently distinct, of using the puppet. On the one hand, an object bears witness to an absence in the case of the play *Io (tragédie)*, and, on the other, an object affirms a presence in the play *En guise de divertissement*. Let's first see what these presences and absences of the performative object consist in and what sense of otherness they convey in the two plays.

Io (tragédie),¹ a text written by Kossi Efoui in 2006, is a rewriting of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and in particular of the episode in which Io meets Prometheus, of whom she requests knowledge of her tragic destiny (see especially vv. 807–52). According to the myth narrated by Aeschylus, Io is expelled from her father's house by the will of Zeus, who is in love with her. She is violated by the god and then forced into exile and compelled to wander endlessly. Her roaming will only cease once she arrives on African soil, in Egypt, where she will give birth to Epaphus, the child of the rape she bears in her womb. The text of *Io (tragédie)*, composed in a rhythmic, musical form reminiscent of the tragic genre from which it derives, is immediately distinguishable by one particular element. The name of Io, who is the protagonist of the drama, does not appear in the list of characters, nor does that of Prometheus or any of the others attested in the ancient myth, but there are four incongruous names: Anna, the Hoochie-Koochie-Man, the Son of the Mother, and

¹ Staging of *Io (tragédie)*:

— Directed by Françoise Lepoix (Paris, Théâtre Paris-Villette, March 2006). In this regard, see Sylvie Chalaye, “*Io (tragédie)* de Kossi Efoui. L’Afrique n’a pas dit son dernier *Io*,” June 30, 2006. <http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=4498> (accessed March 24, 2021).

— Directed by Fabien Kabeya (Lubumbashi, Repubblica Democratica del Congo, April 2011). See <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=spectacle&no=898#> (accessed March 24, 2021).

— Directed by Tiziana Bergamaschi (Rome, Festad’ Africa Festival, 2007; Milan, Teatro Filodrammatici, April 2012).

Masta Blasta. In this sense, the rewriting of the myth proposed by Efoui establishes an unconventional dialogue between his original African culture and his adoptive Western one. This is something that is present in all of his poetics and underlies his own quest for identity. *Io (tragédie)*, specifically, is made up of a stratification of narrative levels between the ancient Greek myth and contemporary reality, creating a correspondence between the story of Io and the ravaged history of Africa.

The text of *Io (tragédie)* is constructed according to a metatheatrical mechanism: The characters in the play are in fact actors of a theater company, La Grande Royale, who are attempting to present the ancient tragedy of Io in what was once their theater. The theater, after years of war, has been transformed into a reception center for young rape victims awaiting childbirth and has now become a voddo market. Each actor in the company seems to assume the role of a character in the Aeschylus tragedy: Anna is Io, Masta Blasta is Prometheus, the Hoochie-Koochie-Man is Hephaestus, and the Son of the Mother is Epaphus, the son of Io. The roles, however, are not static, and each character fluidly assumes a part of the story of Io: At first, the voices of the Son of the Mother and Anna take turns in narrating Io's story, then, the Hoochie-Koochie-Man tells the story of Masta Blasta, the character portraying Prometheus, and, finally, all three recount the birth of the Son of the Mother, who symbolizes both the victim of violence and the hope for a possible redemption. Through this overlapping of stories and character-roles in Efoui's play, the myth of Io is reborn as an allegory of a dispossessed and violated Africa, the victim of colonialism and dictatorships, a continent capable of generating not only children born from these wounds, but perhaps also of generating a change, a new future.

But let's now come to the analysis of the use of the puppet in the rendering of this "polyphony of absent characters" (Dechaufour 2011, 89). As we said before, Io does not appear in the list of characters. The stage directions are the place where Io's character is named, and she is evoked as a puppet. Anna is the first to manipulate the puppet: "On voit Anna avec la marionnette d'Io. Anna coiffe la marionnette d'Io," reads the second stage direction of the play (Efoui 2006, 9). Anna never directly impersonates Io: Anna speaks through the puppet. In this way, Io's voice is conveyed by the puppet.

The puppet of Io is not the only one evoked in Efoui's text: At times, the author alludes to the other puppets (or fetishes) when the characters referred to are absent from the stage action but present in the dramatic action in order to render the "polyphony of the absent characters" we

mentioned before. Thus, when the actors from the La Grande Royale company reveal which role in *Prometheus Bound* they are playing, another stage direction indicates that for each character named, “a fragment of costume, a mask, an accessory” will be displayed, that is an object instead of the performer, the object will thus act as a “witness to an absent actor.” Further on in the play, when the teenage-mothers in the reception center are mentioned, the list of their names is accompanied by Anna’s action of attaching some puppets resembling Ashanti dolls, to a clothesline. At the end of the play, it is the Son of the Mother who holds the puppet of Io, or, rather, who wears her costume: “Anna habille Le Fils de la Mère avec un double du costume d’Io,”² reads the stage direction (63).

Throughout the course of *Io (tragédie)*, the object-puppet assumes the function of the fetish, the doll intended to represent the double of a physically absent entity. Efoui is constantly in search of a kind of theater that is to be observed “more in the animate than in the incarnate” (Dechaoufour 2011, 91).³ He invests the puppet with a magical dimension that makes it into an intermediary body, that is, dead matter capable of becoming alive thanks to the breath of the puppeteer. The puppet creates a third dimension, a space of the elsewhere in which it is possible to make the non-existent exist. In fact, all the characters evoked through the puppets are symbols of the condition of non-existence: Both Io and the African teenage-mothers are illegitimate, alienated figures. And not only in physical and geographical terms: They are, first and foremost, strangers to themselves, unable to perceive their own identity, transformed by violence into inanimate objects, victims of the exile of conscience.⁴

What Efoui is looking for is a theater in which a word is attributed to what is absent, because what is absent is, by virtue of its very absence, much more “animated” than what is “living.” In Efoui’s writing, the performative object creates a channel of communication through which it is possible to glimpse the unspeakable. In this sense, the same function is also attributed to the word: The poetic text of *Io (tragédie)* is a dramaturgy using a light touch, an easy kind of syntax, in which the sentences are often interrupted by caesuras, and punctuation vanishes in favor of a musical rhythm. And it is precisely by attributing a word to the absent, through the dramaturgical use of

² “Anna dresses The Son of the Mother in the same costume as Io’s” (translation mine).

³ “Kossi Efoui cherche à atteindre un théâtre de la Vérité, un théâtre déthéâtralisé qui s’inscrit dans l’animé et non dans l’incarné” (translation mine).

⁴ See Dechaoufour 2011, 92.

poetry and the use of puppetry, that Efoui makes the absent visible, providing the director with textual tools that can make the invisible happen on stage.

As we have seen, the guiding thread running through *Io (tragédie)* is the attempt to narrate unspeakable violence, and this is made possible only through the elimination of the protagonist of the story, and the recourse to the puppet medium to approach what we have called the elsewhere dimension. This same dimension opens onto a wider and more general horizon in the play *En guise de divertissement*, in which the discourse focuses on all those bodies that are stigmatized, mocked or unaccepted, i.e., all those bodies that are denied, mainly for cultural reasons, the status of human beings.

The work undertaken for the creation of *Io (tragédie)* differs from that of *En guise de divertissement* in one very important way: While the former was written by Kossi Efoui and then staged by different theater companies, the text of *En guise de divertissement* was developed while working in collaboration with the Théâtre Inutile, the company with which Efoui had been involved for many years. In 2013, the year the play was created, Kossi Efoui's relationship with the company and its director Nicolas Saelens had evolved into what Efoui and Saelens themselves call a co-creative partnership. The work for *En guise de divertissement* therefore did not start from the page, but from the stage, from the improvisations that the performers proposed using the puppet during rehearsals.



Figure 1. (2013). *En guise de divertissement*. Four performers hold up the body of the mannequin while remaining behind it. Another performer stands with arms outstretched in front of the mannequin. Staged by the Théâtre Inutile company, Amiens, France. Photo by Mickael Troivaux.

The central character of *En guise de divertissement* is a full-scale mannequin,⁵ called L'Oiseau (the Bird). The mannequin is the focus of attention of five actors, called “histrions,” who are going to bring the mannequin back to life, submitting it to the amused gaze of the audience. *En guise de divertissement* is in fact a satire of the historical, and, indeed, political practice of displaying aberrant bodies for the purposes of entertainment—from the victims on the pyres of the Middle Ages to the human zoos of colonialism, from the exhibiting of sick and deformed bodies to our reality shows. The histrions trace, through the mannequin, the history of the relationship with the body of the Other in the public space, which is always (also) a performative space, and therefore a place for entertainment. The stigmatized body here becomes the focal point of the whole stage action. It is not by chance that L'Oiseau is initially presented as the “Histrion Inconnu,” the unknown actor, and the expression “drole d'oiseau,” which translates as oddball or freak, someone bizarre. Efovi writes about this in his presentation of the show:

⁵ It is the author himself who refers to the puppet by this term, on account of the fact that it is constructed in the guise of display mannequins.

He's gone through History under a thousand names. He's gone through times of manly entertainment when we laughed to see him hiding, to see him hunted, to see him exposed. In former lives he was called "wildermann," savage, man of the woods, man of the prairies, witch, Annamite of the Siamese type or of the fundamental type, who believes in demons, ogres, mermaids, amulets, philters, fortune-tellers. He has no precise colour, no precise origin, no precise sex, no precise roots. No specimen was more exposed to the knife, the bullet, fire, or the rope. Just for fun. His name is the Bird. He has a thousand lives. He has known a thousand deaths over the centuries. Tonight, five histrions will raise him before our eyes for a single performance.⁶ (Dechaufour 2015, 317)

The mannequin is therefore characterized by multifaceted symbolic meanings: This "histrion inconnu," this "drôle d'oiseau" represents both a foreign *body*, a wild body that has been judged and exposed to public ridicule in the course of history, and a foreign *individual*, a different and marginalized identity, a singular Otherness relegated to the margins of society. The action of the show proceeds by alternating the presence of the five histrions with that of the mannequin, which is sometimes present among them and manipulated in full view, and, at other times, alone on stage moved against a black background using a technique similar to that of *bunraku*. The mannequin, built by the visual artist Norbert Choquet, has a human form and is articulated in such a way as to move like a human body, without, however, giving an effect of hyperrealism. In some scenes the mannequin is decomposed into its different parts, arms, legs, and head, which are used by the five performers as additional prostheses to their own bodies.

⁶ "Il a traversé l'Histoire sous mille noms. Il a traversé les temps de divertissements virils où l'on a ri de le voir caché, de le voir traqué, de le voir exposé. Dans d'autres vies antérieures, il fut appelé 'wildermann,' sauvage, homme des bois, homme des prairies, sorcière, Annamite de type siamois ou type fondamental, qui croit aux démons, aux ogres, aux sirènes, aux amulettes, aux philtres, aux devins. Il n'a pas de couleur précise, pas d'origine précise, pas de sexe précis, pas de racines précises. Nul spécimen ne fut plus que lui exposé au couteau, à la balle, au feu, à la corde. Pour rire. Il s'appelle L'oiseau. Il a mille vies. Il a connu mille morts à travers les siècles. Ce soir, cinq histrions vont le ressusciter sous nos yeux pour une performance unique" (translation mine).



Figure 2. (2013). *En guise de divertissement*. Two performers seated next to the mannequin look at him as they manipulate it. Staged by the Théâtre Inutile company, Amiens, France. Photo by Mickael Troivaux.

The constant, insistent presence of the mannequin seems to constitute a physical affirmation of “being there,” or rather the materialization of the exposed body on which the play is centered. Thus, as we said at the beginning, the puppet seems to be used in this play as an object affirming a presence. Whereas the puppet of *Io* was meant to represent the absence of the protagonist, in *En guise de divertissement* the puppet appears to be his presence. And yet, the functions carried out by the performative object in the two plays are not so very different. *En guise de divertissement*, apart from the scenes acted by the histrions, presents three suspended moments, indicated in the text by a precise title: “la legende de mannequins,” the legend of the mannequins. Characterized by a more fairytale and poetic tone, these passages recount a legend woven around the figure of the mannequin and contain some repeated phrases that I think are worth quoting:

Listen, listen, listen, it is the legend of the mannequins.
 It is the song of the beings without bodies.
 It is the voice of the dispersed bodies.
 It is the song that says:
 Since his body has not been found

You must resurrect its music.⁷

Your footsteps already fleeing this way and that, from roadside to roadside your footsteps were already saying: Where on earth did I fail?

We saw you walking and hiding, and we laughed. We saw you crawling and hiding, and we laughed. We saw you flying and hiding, and we laughed. You find yourself in the crowd in the city. Weaving, weaving in and out, I know that, hiding your wings to avoid recognition, I know that.

The places on the stage are called the faces of the earth.⁸

“Beings without bodies,” “dispersed bodies,” bodies that must hide—these conditions bring the figure of the Bird closer to those conditions we noted concerning the character of Io. Like Io, the Bird is a symbol of those who are relegated to the margins of human society, of those who are not fully accepted and whose identity resides in the judgment of those who look at them. Therefore, the Bird conveys, even if in a less immediate way, that same sense of Otherness, of invisibility that was so evident in Io. Thus, in both plays, the use of puppetry is necessary to convey a condition of Otherness that is fundamentally the same and that could hardly be rendered in such a meaningful way through the human body of an actor.

⁷ Efoui, *En guise de divertissement*, unpublished granted by the author.

“Écoute, écoute, écoute, c’est la légende des mannequins.
C’est le chant des êtres sans corps. C’est la voix des corps dispersés.
C’est le chant qui dit:

Puisque son corps n’a pas été retrouvé
Il faut bien que tu ressuscites sa musique” (translation mine).

⁸ Efoui, *En guise de divertissement*, unpublished, granted by the author.

“Tes pas fuyant déjà comme ci, fuyant déjà comme ça,
de bas-côté en bas-côté tes pas disaient déjà ça: Où sur terre j’ai échoué?
On t’a vu marcher caché, on a ri. On t’a vu ramper caché, on a ri. On t’a vu voler caché. On a ri. Tu te retrouves dans
la foule d’une ville. Louvoyer, louvoyer, je sais ça, cacher les ailes pour ne pas être reconnu, je sais ça.
Les lieux de la scène s’appellent les faces de la terre” (translation mine).



Figure 3. (2013). *En guise de divertissement*. Five performers keep the mannequin upside down as they declaim the text. Staged by the Théâtre Inutile company, Amiens, France. Photo by Mickael Troivaux.

Efoui thus uses puppetry as a means, as a way to make communicable and collective something that is not. The puppet, as the author himself argues, allows things to be signified through a detour:

It seems to me that the puppet allows us not to be silent about the wound but to tell it through the scar. We know that the puppet is not in pain, but when it means violence, we may know that the material does not suffer, but we cannot avoid a meditation on what hurts the body to which this character testifies.⁹ (Dechaufour and Efoui 2014)

In the texts analyzed, we have seen how the puppet of Io becomes a symbol of the exile and mistreatment of the entire African continent, just as the Bird's mannequin becomes a legend of the “beings without bodies,” of all those who are marginalized or judged to be different and whose bodies are not accepted. In a very particular way, Efoui's playwriting has direct recourse to the

⁹ “Il me semble que la marionnette permet de ne pas faire silence sur la blessure mais de la raconter par le truchement de la cicatrice. On sait que la marionnette n'a pas mal, mais lorsque ça signifie la violence, on a beau savoir que la matière ne souffre pas, on ne peut pas faire l'économie d'une méditation sur ce qui fait mal au corps dont ce personnage témoigne” (translation mine).

performative object, which he includes in the body of the text in order to explore an invisible part of language and to draw on a deeper dimension of saying.

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