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**(RE)FRAMING THE VOCABULARY IN
PERFORMING ARTS IN FLANDERS**

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Decolonize the mind! Researcher and activist, Olivia Rutazibwa, introduced the proposition in Belgium during a TED talk in 2011. It spread like wildfire and various stakeholders in civil society engaged with this challenging invitation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o stated in his homonymic book 25 years ago already that it is required that oppression – and liberation – are expressed in one's own terms and language. Artist and activist Jamila Channouf coupled the action to the words and officially buried the Dutch words "allochtoon & autochtoon", with a collective funeral to launch the 'Ghent Spring' (2013), an artistic grass roots movement. Backed by the decision of newspaper De Morgen to eradicate the same two words, she delineated the terms in which the debate would be conducted in Ghent and partly in Flanders too with this performance in public space. She offered us a first step towards the decolonization of our imagination. As a following step we propose to re-examine 5 words central in the vocabulary of the performing arts today in Flanders today: superdiversity, talent development, canon, contemporary and performance. Before we start with the analysis of these 5 key concepts, we will elaborate shortly on why this process of

decolonization is so necessary in Flanders and even more so in the field of performing arts.

In its most explicit and formal manner, in *most* regions of the world history is *almost* liberated from colonialism as a historical process of foreign invasion and permanent occupation. Officially, colonial time is 'over', but 'coloniality' as a power-structure is definitely not. Sociologist Aníbal Quijano defines this specific form of power as political, social and cultural relations of domination. As a logic of domination, coloniality is still widespread and accounts for the continuous oppression of different cultures and their imagination. As stated by political philosopher Achille Mbembe in *Sortir de la grande nuit*, while colonizing Africa, Europe was also auto-colonizing itself, its structures of knowledge and being. In Belgium too this phenomenon is still very much present. This is tangible for people on the darkened side of our society, but it is also true for the privileged population. As Olivia Rutazibwa stated in her TED-talk: "the mindset that made it possible for us to have the colonies is still very much alive and is very much present in our societies today. It makes discrimination and racism not only possible, but also acceptable and invisible."

To take the suggestion by Thiong'o seriously, namely that decolonization requires expressing oneself in one's own terms, everybody should accordingly become aware of the colonial violence that protects our lifestyles, and of the way in which this colonial violence finds its justification in knowledge division and categorization we have internalized through our education and other knowledge systems. It is about time that we become aware of the need to listen to and to enter into dialogue with the voices that are too often implicitly silenced. Coloniality is deeply entangled with Modernity. Postmodern critiques, as valid as they are in different domains and perspectives, do not manage to address this deep entanglement. We are still dumb, deaf and blind to the historically installed difference, because we do not embody it. We cannot imagine an exterior, let alone an alternative to modernity, therefore we cannot hear the voices of the oppressed that are grounded in non-modern genealogies. The sphere of arts and aesthetics today is for these same reasons trapped in the same logic. The arts – and the performing arts in particular – have been especially sensitive to topics like diversity and discrimination in Belgium. Much more than other spheres in society, there is a form of critical thinking about these themes. The locus of enunciation, the place where we stand historically and culturally, however, remains grounded in postmodern critical thought that has its limits and blind spots.

Decolonization is a possible way out of this (post)modern fata morgana: as a process that starts from the subjectivity of those who are living in its shadows of modernity, healing from the humiliations and the wounds of coloniality, it sheds light on what is outside of the global totality. Set up as generous gifts from within the structures that continuously reproduce the same (post)modern discourse, diversity and emancipation processes are doomed to fail. They systematically ignore the quest of the outsider for ways to cure the colonial wounds, overcome imperial subjugation, and interconnect the multitude of subordinate histories and their related subjectivities.

As political philosopher Walter Dignolo suggests, 'delinking' is the condition that determines the direction of possible processes of decolonization. This disconnection is decisive to re-articulate our bottom-up understanding and way of standing in the world. Throughout this process, that which has been kept silence becomes audible, that which has been obscured visible once again. It is a fundamental rethinking of our subjectivities in a non eurocentric way, that leaves our individualism far behind, and makes space for new communalities and ways to re-existence.

Superdiversity

Shortly after black Sunday in 1991 a multicultural, bottom-up approach to diversity was proposed to acknowledge the plurality and sovereignty of cultures and visions on the world against the universalistic and eurocentric excess in

society at large. This also happened within the artistic context: the different sensibilities to engage oneself in artistic forms were affirmed. At the same time multiculturalism was strongly criticized for its cultural relativistic and essentialist pitfalls. A general and global political recuperation further hollowed out the discourse of multiculturalism, followed by the political deathblow in the form of a consensual political statement of “the failure of multiculturalism”. This statement paved the way for hitherto dormant nationalist, populist and conservative powers. Critique on this turn was preventively sidelined with the sole argument of 'political correctness' and 'patronizing'.

As a way out of this obscure trap the layered concept of “superdiversity” was proposed as a new paradigm to encompass the complexity of diversity. It emphasizes the diversification of diversity in the global era, with its new digital communication technology and renewed mobility. As conceived by its founder, social anthropologist Vertovec, superdiversity is understood as a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, trans-nationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified individuals with a migration background. Though we acknowledge indisputably the benefits of the new proposed paradigm (inter alia to update the western gaze by an internal fragmentation through and awareness of diversity in diversity) we question its ability as a countervailing power. What is left after diversifying all diversity? Unfortunately: again the autonomous individual, the cornerstone of our neo-liberal societies. An illusionary subjectivity that stands in the way of every relationality.

This academic and super-relativistic proposal lacks any grounding. It is adopted by organizations, institutions and political parties, not by activist or artists, because it stands in the way of new connective dynamics, politicization and movement. Superdiversity might surely be a handy tool to understand (a part of) reality but to change this same reality, we need to dare reconsidering new relational subjectivities and political communalities. The decolonial option surpasses classical nationalist and religious divides, brings together the fundamental social and cultural political questions and relates different movements in a pluriversal process towards a horizon where different worlds are possible.

Talent development

Talent development is a term from the business industry that originally designated a function within human resource management aimed at improving the performance of individual workers. Slowly but surely it is also becoming a trending proposition in performing arts in Flanders to address the need to engage with the potentialities of new artists with a migration background operating in the margins of the performing arts circuit. Talent development in the performing arts is directed to the disenfranchised urban youth that did not connect to the regular theater circuit, the different recognized art schools, and the formal executive performing art institutions and networks, but still develop their own artistic strategies autonomously in the margins of formal institutions. Different theaters and workspaces would engage in processes of talent development to catch up with the creative energy of a growing urban diversity in a context of accelerating globalisation. The premise with initiatives of talent development is that the produced art works lack a certain aesthetic and quality, but still originate in some talent that could develop in a certain direction. When artists are systematically addressed in terms of a certain shortage of talent that could be developed and when this development discourse is systematically applied to disenfranchised groups with a migration background, often with roots in colonized countries, an alarm-bell should go off. Despite the classical Western idea of development – *Bildung* - having been declared dead several times in the last decades, it pervasively persists in the form of subjectivation of the required but seldom explicitly enunciated qualities in contemporary performing arts, that in this way reasserts its moral, cultural and artistic

superiority. We tend to forget that development is deeply ingrained in the ideals of modernization, which holds western democratic structure as a universal model for others to follow and emulate. Colonial thinking echoes in the linearity of development discourse, that according to anthropologist Arturo Escobar depicts us as "advanced" and "progressive", and the other as "backward", "degenerate" and "primitive". Talent development, as a discursive construction that with the best intentions wants to help emancipate the urban youth in the artistic sector, is doomed to fail, because with every approach it unintentionally reproduces an under-developed reflection of itself.

The challenge here is to decolonize the institutional structures and organizations in performing arts engaged in talent development, first and foremost the different workspaces and theatres involved in production and participation. It is time to invest in real processes of change, form a consciousness of the violence of organizational structures and architecture, and their underlying aesthetic judgments, on the base of the lived experience and in the terms of the ones who are excluded and suppressed from its different functions.

Canon

The term 'canon' denotes a totality of art works that have been accepted as the most important and influential in shaping our sensible understanding of the world. The canon sets the established standard, defines what can be thought of as archetypal and what can be considered worth striving for, and delineates the list of artworks considered to be of the highest quality. The canon is a dynamic and ever-actualized notion, established by a network of artists, programmers, curators, critics, public and funding committees. These often elitist networks ultimately control the field of representation of what is considered as qualitative art and what not. They determine what is presented as a model and precedent in relation to which other works of art are going to be judged or considered. As stated by Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, modern and postmodern aesthetics represent the philosophical and theoretical ground from where the canon legitimizes itself. This normative self-legitimation enables the implicit disdain, rejection and even erasure of other forms of aesthetics. Artistic movements in the global South and in the local urban margins are challenging the eurocentric boundaries of the canon by making the diversity of forms, stories and histories that have been silenced and forgotten tangible again. These movements have the potential to decolonize the canon through the unraveling of the hegemonic discourse. In this optic we not only need to pose the question what topics have been excluded thus far, and how this has shaped the world we live in. We also need to delink from the known normative points of reference, by continuously accentuating the limits of the eurocentric canon through practices of aesthetic disobedience. By the narration of alternative stories, and the rediscovery of new forms, we build up new representation fields that find their way to a multiplicity of possibilities.

Contemporary

For the performing arts, as for contemporary art, the contemporaneity of a work is - next to its 'universality' - one of its most cherished values. We are not going to engage in the perils of universalism, as this has already been questioned in depth within well-known post-modern critique. Instead what we ask is *who* defines that contemporaneity and *where*? This becomes important if we consider that most of the artistic work that falls outside of the eurocentric canon, might be perceived as anachronistic: as something that is already done, a remnant of the past, something that is 'passé'.

To clarify the discussion it is useful to distinguish four different interpretations of the term 'contemporary'. We can understand it as (1) belonging to the same chronological - physical - present, (2) as being responsive to the context in which the artist works and lives, i.e., as a critical attitude towards established conventions and the status quo, (3) as an imperative to innovate or simply (4) as a genre.

A common pitfall is to conflate these four meanings into one, for instance 'contemporary dance'. One reclaims for oneself all of these understandings, denying them to other artistic genres and practices. This is of extreme importance if we consider the global reach and internationalisation of the performing arts. Who decides where and for whom what is contemporary and what not? Which other temporalities are excluded by this narrowing operation, which other ways of inhabiting time are reduced into mere anachronisms and thus dismissed and made invisible?

The second problem lies in the need for constant innovation, which betrays the modern understanding of temporality as progress: as a singular, linear and unidirectional development towards the Future. This historicist conception of Time has been criticized by postmodern thinkers and taken up by performance artists in Europe, through the renewed interest drawn by re-enactments. From other loci of enunciation however, there is always a decolonial option that embodies a different politics of time, one that rescues memory as a site of struggle, one that involves the possibility of turning ones back to the future and inhabiting the past. As stated plainly by sociologist Rolando Vazquez: "the rescue of memory is not a conservative movement, the possibility to experience the past is not essentialist, but rebellious."

Performance

Everybody working in the field of performing arts might agree that 'performance' as an artform has a great potential to reflect upon the world we live in. Most of the problems we have briefly touched upon so far, could be the theme of a performance. Nevertheless, we might easily recognize that performance in performing arts is not a universal practice. It is important to recognize its limits, not only geographically, but also at the level of its potentialities. Performance is based on the illusion of 'the individual self', as a construction that one can constantly enact and re-enact. Central in this understanding is the relativity, fluidity and multiplicity of 'the self' and the construction of identity that can be subjected to a performance on stage.

Performance hides and silences in this way the historicity and relationality (and thus the privileges) behind this ever moving self - it sometimes even erases it. The black box is instrumentalized as a free, a-historical and neutral space where one can perform multiple identities. The stage as a free space positions oneself outside all power relations. The stage then cuts its modern history from its surface and flattens its consciousness and experience of reality and constrains it to the presence, in function of future possibilities and ideals. It hides as such its (post)modern delineation and inherent processes of in- and exclusion. Performing arts need not to close into oneself, but has to become aware of the colonial violence they can so easily perpetuated due to its privileged position within global networks of cultural "exchange."

For performers that consider themselves active agents in their history of oppression there is nothing relative about performance. Its is a relational and embodied process that directs the way to re-existence through the re-mediation of history, a healing process that engages with a certain memory. The embodiment of these histories of oppression is not enacted or re-enacted, but a lived experience. When decolonizing performance, what happens on the stage is understood as an embodied process, that uncovers the veil of universalism and privileges of the black box. Performance in this sentence has the ability to provoke processes of aesthetic disobedience, challenging the hegemony of postmodern aesthetics, shifting the geography of knowing and sensing, on local and international level from the perspective of its historic alterity.

Bio

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