

Hello,

I am especially pleased to be here today as part of the "Crisis and Recovery: Theatre and Performance Before and After the Global Pandemic" conference, organized by the Canadian Association for Theatre Research and the Société québécoise d'études théâtrales. I would like to warmly thank Catherine Tadros, Nicole Nolette, and Yana Meerzon for their invitation to participate in this international event. My talk today is an opportunity for me to share the work I am doing in the SeFeA (Scènes Francophones et Ecritures de l'Altérité) laboratory at the Institut de Recherche en Etudes théâtrales on Maroon¹ bodies on contemporary stages and is entitled:

Becoming Maroon, a Model of Salvation for Theatre Creation

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[You can read more on this work in *Corps marron. Les poétiques de marronnage des dramaturgies afro-contemporaines*, published by Editions Passage(s)].

In spite of the coercion of the plantations, slaves deployed a Maroon gesture of resistance and emancipation through performances — performances that slaveowners, for their own pleasure, demanded of them. One can find this Maroon stance in contemporary Afrodiasporic art, at first with hip-hop cultures, then throughout the 1990s with playwrights such as the Togolese Kossi Efoui, the Ivorian Koffi Kwahulé, the Congolese Caya Makhélé, the African-American Suzan-Lori Parks, the Guadeloupeans Maryse Condé and Gerty Dambury, and more recently, the Guinean Hakim Bah, the Congolese Dieudonné Niangouna, the Haitian Guy Régis Junior, performers Rébecca Chaillon and Véronique Kanor of Martinique, the slammer of West Indian origin D de Kabal, and many other Afrodescendant artists including choreographers like Bintou Dembélé and Michel Onomo, and visual artists like Basquiat, Alexis Peskine, and Kara Walker.

This creative gesture of Maroon resistance consists of adapting, of constantly reinventing oneself, of never being where one is expected, of changing one's state and, in the end, of

¹ We have chosen to translate the French terms *marron* and *marronnage* in English here as *Maroon* and *Marronnage* to reflect Sylvie Chalaye's uses of the words, which not only reference Maroon communities and history but also, more broadly, look to *Maroon* and *Marronnage* as conceptual themes.

distorting expectations in order to melt into the heart of the world's forest, to better toy with the established order, with institutions, and with colonial legacies. Ultimately, the current crisis can be seen as an invitation to consider Maroon artistic gestures that have inspired Afrodescendent artistic creation since the birth of jazz, and that can serve as models of salvation for theatrical creation for years to come.

Marronnage is a gesture of emancipation in a dominated land, an invention of freedom at the very heart of impossibility. The Maroon slave is the one who leaves the plantation and enters the forest to escape the colonial order and to rebuild a lost world in the depths of nature. Marronnage is a gesture of salvation, one that passes through acts of escape, camouflage, invisibility, and the reconstruction of self. This heroic Marronnage, which colonists reduced to de-domestication, is the meaning of the Spanish *el cimarrón*, an indigenous Caribbean term the colonists took over to attribute to slaves who, like feral chickens or pigs, escaped domestication to return to the wild. This Marronnage is notably at the origin of the Bushinengue, the people of the forest. Marronnage is also at the origin of the uprisings so dreaded by slaveowners and always so brutally repressed. This is the *grand marronnage* the colonists so feared because it could endanger the entire colony, especially since the Maroon slaves allied themselves with indigenous peoples and undermined the foundations of the colonial organization, mastering guerrilla warfare skills, as was the case with the Natchez in French Louisiana. Also, when the dogs did catch up with the Maroons, they were subjected to symbolic and radical punishments: ears cut off so as not to hear the call of the forest, backs of knees and Achilles tendons severed so as not to set off in the race towards freedom. But over time, slaves developed other strategies of Marronnage, a Marronnage from within, identified as a *petit marronnage*. They built, under the nose of the slaveowner, secret spaces of freedom, based on collusion among the other slaves of the plantation. This freedom, this reconstruction of identity and culture, this escape from coercion from within, gave way to musical and choreographic practices, as well as to practices of orality transported to the hold of the slave ship, giving birth to what would become popular Black music and dance. What we call jazz today is the generic vibration that took on an international dimension after the Civil War and made its way to Europe during the First World War.

By appropriating the Black body, slaveowners appropriated their work force, their labor, while also appropriating slaves' bodies as sources of pleasure, sexual pleasure of course, but also as entertainment. The slavers did not fail to soothe their sexual itch with these bodies, piled up naked in the hold. They also forced the slaves to dance and make music on the deck of the ship:

physical exercise necessary for the good hygiene of the cargo, so they said, but also a moment of amusement for the crew.

On the plantations, the most talented young slaves were forced to provide entertainment for the slaveowners, and while drumming was forbidden, as slave masters perceived that it carried messages far and wide that could foment revolt, the talented slaves created musical performances with songs and comic sketches that told anecdotes, described plantation life and the actions of the master, and flattered white society. A dramaturgical tradition was thus built, based on satire and trickery. The slaves performed shows that actually mocked slaveowners, caricatured them, denounced violence and abuse, and offered tricks to circumvent work, to overturn certain endeavors, and to organize the escape of those who wanted to go underground. But the subversive dimension of this musical theatre of the plantations was not perceived by white society. Neither the slaveowners, nor the visitors from the North, nor the European travelers perceived its underground meanings. They were left with a sense of comedy they considered benign and inconsequential. I refer you here to the work of Geneviève Fabre of the CNRS on Black theatre in the United States. These shows deployed all sorts of humorous tricks with ingenuity and craft, twisting meanings and playing on words: the art of signifyin(g), which Henry Louis Gates has analyzed as a distinct feature of African-American literature. They also played with trope and drew on African animal fables. In "Ligne de fuite du marronnage," published in 2018 in *Multitudes*, Denetem Touam Bona observes: "Indissociables du marronnage, les techniques de camouflage s'étendent à la façon dont les esclaves vrillent la langue du maître. Parce qu'il soumet le français à des variations polyphoniques, le créole peut chiffrer, coder, crypter les pensées les plus subversives."² Yet these practices had to be constantly renewed and changed so as not to be identified. The Maroon gesture found ways to compose with impediments, constraint, confinement: Marronnage as a way of learning to create within the fold, within stolen spaces and stolen time.

At the end of the 1980s, at the time when hip-hop practices and urban dance were unfolding and postcolonial theory was growing, playwrights like Kossi Efoui became spearheads in the theatre of this Maroon sensibility, which seemed essential to escape the identity-based labels and assignments that African playwrights, especially Francophone ones, were then subjected to, as institutions continued to dictate artistic practice and to circumscribe what African

² "Indissociable from Marronnage, camouflaging techniques extended to the ways in which slaves twisted the master's language. Because it subjects the French language to polyphonic variations, Creole can encrypt, code, and encode the most subversive thoughts."

aesthetic should be. This creative Marronnage entails going forward while masked. It entails never being where expected in order to thwart the identity injunctions that trap racialized artists and that order them to respond according to what the institutional order wishes of them. As such, it calls into question the notion of Africanity.

For Kossi Efoui, going forward masked means, "dégager un espace de liberté incroyable dans un mouchoir de poche."³

From Marronnage, these playwrights devised an alternative creative attitude and developed an "other" theatre. This theatre was neither Western theatre, with its aesthetic norms and stakes, nor African theatre, whether imagined through the prism of the Western gaze and its idea of Africa, or even through the prism of a certain African gaze nostalgic for a past lost with colonization and wishing to rediscover ancestral traditions. These playwrights rejected exhibitionist exoticizations inherited from colonial exhibitions and human zoos. Hence, for example, the vehement position of Dieudonné Niangouna in his play *M'appelle Mohamed Ali*:

Pas ce comédien noir, cet Africain qu'on attend sur scène pour venir nous divertir avec ses grossièretés africaines, ses sauvageries exotiques, son accent de petit-nègre, ses ridiculités sordides, ses démangeaisons animales, ses folklores tonitruants, ses trances endiablées. Je ne suis pas ce comédien-là. [...] Vous savez tout ce que vous savez de moi, mais vous ne le savez que de vous-mêmes, de vos attentes, de vos peurs, de la bête qu'on vient voir en cage... L'histoire que vous attendez n'aura pas lieu. Vos attendus l'on déjà mangée. C'est ça mon théâtre. Mon théâtre est le drame de ce qu'on veut du théâtre africain. Ce n'est pas une histoire que vous connaissez... Le temps des spectacles est passé. Même la nudité ne transmet plus la vérité. Nous allons fermer le théâtre pour ouvrir l'homme du dedans.⁴

These playwrights refused spectators any exotic and entertaining scenery, and denied them the dramaturgical elements that they could recognize as belonging to the Western theatrical tradition. They affirmed a dramaturgical identity in constant movement, deliberately elusive,

³ "freeing up an incredible space of freedom in a handkerchief."

⁴ "Not this Black comedian, this African who is expected to come on stage and entertain us with his African coarseness, his exotic savageries, his little negro accent, his sordid ridiculousness, his animal itchings, his blaring folklores, his frenzied trances. I am not that comedian. [...] You know everything you know about me, but you only know about yourselves, your expectations, your fears, the beast you've come to see in a cage. The story you expect will not take place. Your expectations have already eaten it. This is my theatre. My theatre is the drama of what we want from African theatre. It is not a story that you know. The time of shows is over. Even nudity does not transmit the truth anymore. We are going shut down the theatre to open the person inside."

never enclosed, always becoming, always mutating, made of layering and creolization. An inventive and original dramaturgy, deliberately monstrous, Frankensteinian even, bringing spectators into a state of crisis, unsettling their certainties and their preconceived ideas, turning all Manichaeisms and all simplifications upside down.

Dieudonné Niangouna describes the need to “box” the situation (“Pour faire du théâtre il faut boxer la situation”), approaching theatre as a Kung-Fu with the spectator. This theatre illustrates what Homi Bhabha attempts to define in his post-colonial theory with concepts of hybridity and the third space: a space of negotiation, rejecting the colonist/colonized, dominant/dominated, centre/periphery oppositions — binary oppositions, in other words — as a way of intervening and charting an alternative creative course.

These playwrights work to invent an "other" theatre, a singular theatre, a theatre that can be constructed over gaps, over flaws, over absences, a theatre that creates a link between humans, that abolishes Manichean views and imagines the world in different terms. For Homi Bhabha, it is the process of hybridity that leads to the creation of the unthought. He writes: "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."

The Maroon poetics of this "other" theatre are built through sidesteps, escapes, detours, deviations. It is a theatre that stands in the margin and sees creative value in clandestinity. It is Dieudonné Niangouna's “Attitude clando” or “Carré blanc,” the invisibilization or the "empty box" (“case vide”) of Kossi Efoui, or what Koffi Kwahulé calls "heresy," a theatre that challenges itself.

In terms of space, Maroon dramaturgy looks to the body as a territory. The body is indeed the theatre of the drama, the theatre of operations, because the body is a territory to be reconquered, a territory stolen from the master and this other body, the body of the dream of the slave. The Maroon body is the body on which the master does not have a hold: a powerful, protean body, a musical, vibratory body. As goes the adage in Koffi Kwahulé's *Fama*: “L’esclave appartient au maître, mais le maître des rêves de l’esclave est l’esclave seul.”⁵

Here is Dénétem Touam Bona in “La fugue créatrice des nègres marrons,” published in 2016:

⁵ "The slave belongs to the master, but the master of the slave's dreams is the slave alone."

Le marronnage se définit comme un processus de dé-domestication, comme un ensauvagement créateur, comme une indocilité radicale. Cette indocilité se manifeste d'abord dans le corps : le marronnage est avant tout riposte inventive qui passe par des postures, des techniques corporelles, tout un savoir incorporé. Cible de la l'appareil esclavagiste, le corps est le premier théâtre d'opération, la première position à libérer, le premier droit à restaurer. La course folle du marron s'inscrit dans une culture insurrectionnelle du corps : corps à corps de la révolte, corps suicidés, corps dansants, chantants, vibrants, corps possédés. A l'origine, tout rythme est rythme d'une course : martèlement des pieds sur le sol, martèlement du cœur sous la poitrine, martèlement des mains sur la peau tendue. C'est d'abord au moyen du rythme que l'Africain déporté trace une ligne de fuite.⁶

In terms of time, a prevailing unpredictability preserves a sense of immateriality, avoiding any fixation and favouring the energy of improvisation — of creating empty-handed, with nothing other than the body and the voice, and moving forward in lightness without ties.

In the words once again of Dénétem Touam Bona: “Par leurs gestes et mouvements virtuoses, par leur dislocation rythmique, les corps marrons s'épurent, s'effacent, se virtualisent dans le suspense d'une *blue* note indocile...”⁷ (Lignes de fuite du marronnage, 2018).

Koffi Kwahulé refers to this dimension of unpredictability in the relationship between his dramaturgical approach and jazz. As follows is an excerpt from *Frère de son* (pp. 53-54):

Le jazz dit une chose simple : le royaume est perdu, et en perdant mon royaume, j'ai fait l'expérience qu'il n'y a rien d'immuable, que ce que je dois construire ce n'est pas l'Empire State Building, ce n'est pas la Tour Eiffel, ni une cathédrale ou une pyramide. Ce que je veux construire n'est pas de l'ordre du tangible parce que j'ai fait l'expérience de la perte. Je veux construire un édifice immatériel, qui sera toujours instable, toujours improvisé, qui ne sera pas un monument, qui ne sera pas quelque chose qui se fixe, qui se fige. Mais un

⁶ “Marronnage is defined as a process of de-domestication, as a creative rewilding, as a radical indocility. This indocility manifests itself first of all in the body: Marronnage is above all an inventive response involving physical positions, body techniques, a whole embodied knowledge. A target of slavery, the body is the first theatre of operation, the first position to be liberated, the first right to be restored. The Maroon races madly into an insurrectional body culture: rebellious and embracing bodies, suicidal bodies, dancing bodies, singing bodies, vibrating bodies, possessed bodies. At the start, all rhythm has a racing quality: the pounding of the feet on the ground, the pounding of the heart under the chest, the pounding of the hands tense skin. It is through rhythm first and foremost that the deported African draws a line of escape.”

⁷ “Through their virtuosic gestures and movements, through their rhythmic dislocations, Maroon bodies purify themselves, erase themselves, virtualize themselves in the suspense of willful blue note.”

édifice qui ne pourra jamais s'écrouler. C'est ce défi que porte en lui le jazz, tout le temps : j'ai perdu mon royaume, mais j'en construis un autre qui échappe à toute destruction, un royaume suspendu en dehors de toute fixité. Il sera une question perpétuelle. Je crois que c'est ce rêve-là que raconte le jazz. Et ce n'est pas seulement un rêve noir, mais un rêve humain. [...] Cette expérience de la perte fonde la communauté noire. Dépossédés de tout, les Noirs étaient en situation de mieux comprendre le monde tel qu'il est, de mieux exprimer la nécessité de construire quelque chose d'indestructible, d'insaisissable. Ils ont créé le jazz pour exprimer l'aventure noire qui est finalement toute l'aventure humaine. C'est cette dimension du jazz qui m'émeut : comment le jazz dit l'aventure humaine, cette idée d'inachèvement, de fragilité. Faire du jazz, c'est contester ce qui est arrêté et qui semble figé à jamais. C'est un grand rire dans le monde, une faille. C'est pour cela que j'aime tant Armstrong et Dizzy Gillespie, leur rire éclatant devant ce monde qui fait tout pour oublier sa faiblesse.⁸

The challenge of this "other" theatre is not to build an unbreakable structure — a fortress, a tomb — but rather to build above the void by accepting loss, lack, absence, and disappearance: to build, in short, the theatre of a tightrope walker, the theatre of an ephemeral vine, to be transported everywhere, to unite people in spite of their differences, weaving links between the living and the disappeared in the here and now. It is to build a theatre that becomes a ceremonial and memorial gesture, rebuilding community and reconstituting social networks through a true eucharistic dimension, as does the art of the Tembè and the interlaces of the sculptures of the Bushinengue. The Dieudonné Niangouna offers a poetic and phantasmagorical vision of this somnambulist-funambulist theatre:

Un somnambule qui glisse le long d'une corde à linge, mais jamais ne tombe et jamais ne

⁸ "Jazz says something simple: the kingdom is lost. And in losing my kingdom, I found that nothing is immutable, that what I must build is not the Empire State Building, it is not the Eiffel Tower, not a cathedral and not a pyramid. What I want to build is not tangible because I have experienced loss. I want to build an immaterial an immaterial edifice, one that will always be unstable, always improvised, that will not be a monument, that will not fixed or frozen. A building that can never fall apart. This is the challenge that jazz always carries within it: I have lost my kingdom, but I am building another one that will escape all destruction, a suspended kingdom outside of all fixity. This will be a perpetual question. I think that it is this dream that jazz tells. And it is not just a Black dream, but a human dream. [...] This experience of loss is the foundation of the Black community in America. Dispossessed of everything, Blacks were in a position to better understand the world as it is, to better express the need to build something indestructible, unseizable. They created jazz to express the Black adventure, which is finally the whole human adventure. That is the dimension of jazz that moves me: how jazz captures the human adventure, this idea of incompleteness, of fragility. To play jazz is to challenge what is fixed and seems to be have stopped moving forever. It's a big laugh inside of the world, a crater. That's why I love Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie so much — their bursts of laughter make us forget the weakness of the world."

reste debout. Il glisse sans cesse, et son périple est sans fin. Une corde rattachée aux deux infinis qui traversent le monde. Ses pieds claudiquent, plus petits que son corps léger et fourchu, le vent le harcèle, il court sans yeux le long de la corde à linge. Sans équilibre, mais jamais ne tombe, il bascule, dort en marchant, se laisse happer, se penche comme un hasard. Tandis que maman n'arrête pas d'étaler le linge sale de la famille, le somnambule passe dessus.⁹ (*Shéda*, "Songe," Carnets-livres, p. 36)

This is why these dramaturgies are meant to be incantatory. They work with storytelling and music as spaces for the reconstruction of the "unanchored" ("désancré") social body, as Dénétem Touam Bona says — disjointed, dismantled, dismembered — and they explore a new state of the body through theatre and music, a diasporic body, reconstructed in a chorus of voices.

"Qu'as-tu fait de ton frère ? Cette question – 'Qu'as-tu fait de ton frère ?' - fonde la spécificité du théâtre en tant qu'art. Je veux pouvoir répondre à cette question si Dieu me la posait. Qu'ai-je fait de mon frère ? Ce que j'en ai fait, j'essaie d'en témoigner dans mon théâtre,"¹⁰ says Koffi Kwahulé.

By refusing the enclosure of assigned identities, by choosing a Maroon position, the contemporary dramaturgies of the Caribbean and the African diasporas speak with force to the dissemination and loss of the body, the colonized body, the body broken by slavery, but also the pulverized social body, the body of identity, disintegrated and confiscated by the acculturation imposed by colonial history. This question of the social body's belonging is also asked to French Afrodescendants, as French society systematically sends them back to a cultural elsewhere, forcing them to build an identity of oral parental transmission, for lack of a clear national identity in the eyes of the other.

People who have experienced dispersion of the social body and a scattering of identity —an ontological pulverization, the vaporized body that Koffi Kwahulé defines as the origin of

⁹ "A sleepwalker who slides along a clothesline, never falling and never staying upright. He slides endlessly, his journey is endless. A rope attached to two infinite points that cross the world. His feet clatter, smaller than his light and forked body, the wind torments him, he runs without eyes along the clothesline. Without balance, but never falling, he topples over, sleeps while walking, lets himself get caught, bends over as if by chance. While mother keeps spreading out the family's dirty laundry, the sleepwalker walks over it."

¹⁰ "What have you done with your brother? This question – 'What have you done with your brother?' – is the basis of the specificity of theatre as an art form. I want to be able to answer this question if God were to ask me. What have I done with my brother? What I have done with him, I try to bear witness to in my theatre."

tragedy — have found a recentering and joining force in oral transmission. Through the spoken word, they have built an improbable but accessible territory: a territory of refuge, a space of escape, a reconstruction of self. Against all odds, music and orality have been the salvation of the people of the diaspora, victims of the slave trade, deported with their bodies as their only baggage, boarded naked into the hold of slave ships. The trust placed in humans, in their body and their memory, rather than in material, allowed for the clandestine transport of songs, sounds, and stories.

Yet contemporary Afro-Caribbean dramatic forms, always steeped in orality, remain more than ever a place of expression of diasporic consciousness, whether inherited from colonial history or from more recent migrations. These forms of expression approach theatre as an art of overcoming loss, as an art of reconstruction and sharing, as a reconstruction of a lost kingdom. But this kingdom is not a tangible construction. It has the immaterial resistance of orality and the aerial vitality of the vines of the forest.

"Etre marron, c'est être forêt,"¹¹ writes Dénétem Touam Bona, recalling Jean-Baptiste Vidalou's *Être forêts, habiter des territoires en lutte* published by La Découverte in 2017. "Pourquoi utiliser le modèle végétal de la liane pour penser l'émergence d'un 'Nous' - une communauté décloisonnée – embrassant les individus et les groupes les plus divers ? Sans doute parce que la liane dispose d'une formidable puissance d'entrelacement. Son échappée vers les cieux n'est possible que parce qu'elle compte sur les autres, parce qu'elle se mêle aux autres, tout en les entremêlant."¹²

The health crisis has forced us all to experience dissemination, distance, dispersion, the impossibility of gathering, the dismemberment of the social body, and the loss of our territories of belonging. The Marronnage of Afrodiasporic dramaturgies is a model of salvation because it is a theatre that accepts loss and disappearance, a theatre that does not aspire to nostalgia or innovation, a theatre that is neither turned towards the past, nor pulled towards the horizon, but towards an economy centered on the body, an ethical and aesthetic essentialness, the body as a resonator of words, as a nerve ending of orality, the body of escape, flying into the imaginary. The Maroon gesture exists in a retracted time and space, therefore without centrifugal

¹¹ "To be Maroon is to be a forest."

¹² "Why use the plant model of the vine to think about the emergence of a 'We' - a decompartmentalized community - embracing the most diverse individuals and groups? No doubt because the vine has a formidable power of intertwining. Its escape to the heavens is only possible because it relies on others, because it mingles with others while enmeshing with them."

perspective. Rather, all the energies of the Maroon gesture are centripetal, turned towards bodies and what unites them. "Nous allons fermer le théâtre et ouvrir l'homme du dedans,"¹³ says Dieudonné Niangouna. This Maroon theatre becomes a "Factory of ceremony" ("Fabrique de cérémonie") in the words of Kossi Efoui and enables the reconstitution of the social body, the body of the horde, to emerge from isolation and to unite once again, to fly, to dream together and to deploy a force of resilience. Without a territory to inhabit, Marronnage teaches one to inhabit time. It is this energy that tomorrow's theatre should embrace in order to work with vibration, with murmuration, uniting bodies of the horde and allowing us to rediscover the social body, the choral body, in other words, the "lyannaj" of our humanity, the spirit of the forest. For, as Edouard Glissant, Patrice Chamoiseau, Olivier Pulvar, the many other Caribbean intellectuals who signed 2009 *Manifeste pour les « produits » de haute nécessité* remind us: "La dynamique du lyannaj est d'allier et rallier, de lier, relier et relayer tout ce qui se trouve désolidarisé."¹⁴

¹³ "We are going to shut down the theatre and open the person inside."

¹⁴ "The dynamic of the lyannaj is to unite and to rally, to link, to connect, and to relay everything that is divided."