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Abstract

From Edward Said's early investigation into the politics of how theory travels (1983), to Obioma Nnaemeka's warning that 'theory-making should not be a unidirectional enterprise – always emanating from a specific location and applicable to every location' (362), postcolonial scholarship has always been wary of the circuits that prescribe theory making in a global economy of knowledge. Yet, postcolonial theory has not succeeded in avoiding the trap of articulating itself across these same circuits of knowledge production, particularly when it comes to reading the texts and signs of the continent of Africa. The tools of postcolonial studies' theoretical repertoire have, for the most part, been forged in the academic centres of the West, only encountering African cultural and aesthetic texts via the methodology of application.

ASHLEIGH HARRIS

An Awkward Silence: Reflections on Theory and Africa

From Edward Said's early investigation into the politics of how theory travels (1983), to Obioma Nnaemeka's warning that 'theory-making should not be a unidirectional enterprise — always emanating from a specific location and applicable to every location' (362), postcolonial scholarship has always been wary of the circuits that prescribe theory making in a global economy of knowledge. Yet, postcolonial theory has not succeeded in avoiding the trap of articulating itself across these same circuits of knowledge production, particularly when it comes to reading the texts and signs of the continent of Africa. The tools of postcolonial studies' theoretical repertoire have, for the most part, been forged in the academic centres of the West, only encountering African cultural and aesthetic texts via the methodology of application. This reiteration of the appropriation of African cultural and aesthetic objects into a Western frame of interpretation has, I argue, never resolved the Subaltern Studies group's early concern with the problem of intellectual appropriation of the subaltern voice. Instead, theory formation, both in and outside of Africa, has failed to escape this 'unidirectional enterprise'. As Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall proclaim, this has occurred through the conception of African knowledge production as autochthonous, which re-inscribes African knowledge and theory as unique to the geographical borders of the continent, thereby existing outside of the circuits of global knowledge production (Mbembe & Nuttall 348). The essay traces the ways in which both postcolonial studies and theory making in Africa, in their focus on the political imperative to give voice to African selves, have become complicit in this theoretical patterning.

After establishing the problem of this pattern of theory formation and use, the essay considers various investigations into the ethics of letting the other 'be', as opposed to demanding (even in the interests of scholarly 'hospitality') that he/she give an account of him/herself. The true hospitality of learning how to hear and understand African knowledge and theory production (in both the West and in Africa) involves, I argue, a hearing that must, of necessity, unsettle the interrogator. Not because the theory production of Africa is inherently unsettling or different to theory from elsewhere, but because entering the unsettling and ethical space of listening, in philosopher Luce Irigaray's sense, means suspending the belief that as postcolonial scholars we 'know' the places that our scholarship engages. Such an acknowledgement is the crucial first step in accepting that reading and understanding across vastly different and infinitely complex

cultural, geographical, linguistic and epistemic spaces will always involve misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It also suggests that there is no authentic African theory that will convey the massive sign 'Africa' to the world. African theories will, themselves, not fully know Africa.

In deemphasising the question of voice and concomitantly emphasising the ethics of silence (both in being silent to hear the voice of the other and in letting the other's chosen silence be), this essay posits a methodology for theorising in and on Africa that focuses on the suspension of the scholar's claims to expertise and knowledge. In the 'awkward silence' that ensues, I argue, we might find our way through the dilemma of maintaining the political importance of location in how we circulate and consolidate bodies of theory whilst simultaneously refusing an autochthonous location of knowledge in African locations.

THEORY ON/IN AFRICA

At a recent symposium held in Helsinki,¹ Harish Trivedi made an impassioned plea to 'Western scholars' to stop patronising the rich literary traditions in postcolonial nations by spending their time applying trite theoretical concepts wrought in an Anglophone, Western academic global circuit, to texts written (in English) by the postcolonial darlings of the Western academy. The flattening collocation 'Western scholars' notwithstanding, Trivedi's point, more elegantly outlined in 'Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation', warrants reflection: as a global discipline, postcolonial scholarship is in danger of becoming narcissistically self-producing, a loop that, Trivedi argues, actively silences languages, cultural expressions and aesthetics that are not directed towards a Western, Anglophone audience. One may add that the term 'global', when applied to academic disciplines is itself a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, since the provenance and providence of those disciplines remains firmly located in Anglophone universities. These disciplines — for our purpose 'postcolonial studies' — travel, of course, but their travels follow the logic of export, which is to say that they 'arrive' in other parts of the globe as already solid disciplinary objects, pre-organised by the contexts that they have been exported from and resistant to reshaping.

I sympathise with Trivedi's frustration at the ways these so-called global knowledge economies overproduce the value of Anglophone writing² and writers who posit themselves as 'cultural translators' operating *for* a Western (Anglophone) audience. The issue gets to the heart of the impasse that the discipline of postcolonial studies has found itself at for many years: is it possible to articulate a trans-historical, trans-cultural postcolonial theory? If so, how can the critical tools we take from such a theoretical repertoire be used to read aesthetic and cultural texts from postcolonial contexts without reproducing a colonial hierarchy of knowledge?

This is not a new question in postcolonial studies, of course: indeed, as Said warned us, as early as 1983, postcolonial theory (indeed, all cultural theory):

... can quite easily become cultural dogma. Appropriated to schools or institutions, they quickly acquire the status of authority within the cultural group, guild, or affiliative family. Though of course they are to be distinguished from grosser forms of cultural dogma like racism and nationalism, they are insidious in that their original provenance — their history of adversarial, oppositional derivation — dulls the critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively, responsive to history. (Said 179)

The perniciousness of this pattern is nowhere more keenly felt than in the ways in which Gayatri Spivak's nuanced and detailed critique in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has been canonised. The essay is often reduced to the term 'subaltern silence', which once simulacraly detached from Spivak's argument, travels freely. Our frustration with the glib way in which the phrase is often used is redoubled if we return to Spivak's essay and recall her adamant resistance to such recuperations of her own methodology into an imperial logic. With the specific intention to articulate the insurgent position of Subaltern Studies as an intellectual method, Spivak notes the epistemic violence inherent in the making and use of first-world theory (74). She writes that the work of Subaltern Studies must provide 'a radical textual practice of differences' that does not simply reiterate 'the self-diagnosed transparency of the first-world radical intellectual' (80). Critiquing Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault's post-representational theories, she further notes:

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. Thus Deleuze makes this remarkable pronouncement: 'A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier'. (Spivak 69–70)

It leaves us somewhat despondent to see Spivak's essay reduced to the simulacral catchphrase, 'subaltern speech', and placed in just such a theoretical toolbox,³ thereby losing 'its insurgent, lively, responsiveness to history' (Said 179).

Without rehearsing the multiple ongoing debates regarding the epistemic violence of such first-world (Spivak) or Western (Trivedi) analysis, as a starting point this essay accepts the proposition that the tools of interpretation and criticism that constitute postcolonial studies have by and large circumvented African modes of intellectual and theoretical production. That is to say, at the very same time as African studies is vastly represented across the Anglophone academy, we might, along with Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, note the 'overwhelming neglect of *how* the meanings of Africanness are made' (350). This neglect, born I would argue out of an all-too-easy application of theoretical commonplaces to an entire continent, leads to 'dominant imaginings of Africa', and 'routine readings and deciphering of African spaces' (Mbembe & Nuttall 352).

These rote readings of Africa, produced by a methodology in which the continent and its cultural production are ingested into a theoretical model produced 'elsewhere', do not emerge because there is no theory formation in Africa itself but because such readings fail to engage African theory *as* theory.

This is not to say that African spaces and cultural and aesthetic objects can only be interpreted through theories produced in Africa, of course. Indeed, Mbembe and Nuttall's insistence that 'all knowledge is contingent on other knowledges' and, as such, 'we must read Africa in the same terms we read everywhere else' (351) is a premise in this argument, though with one significant revision: I argue that 'the terms' that we use to read everywhere else need interrogation and must themselves enter into a conversation with theorising from, and theory in, Africa.

Nnaemeka addresses one aspect of this dynamic by suggesting that theory formation should inhabit a 'third-space' in Africa that calibrates global (*mondial*) knowledge to and with indigenous knowledge archives (Nnaemeka 376–78). It is worth clarifying what Nnaemeka means by 'third-space'. She writes:

My choice of *space* over *place* or *location* in mapping what I call the *third space* is informed by the distinction Achille Mbembe makes between place and territory in his essay on boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa. (377)

For Mbembe,

A place ... is an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies a stability [sic.]. As for a territory, it is fundamentally an intersection of moving bodies. It is defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it. Seen in this way, it is a set of possibilities that historically situated actors constantly resist or realize.

(qtd in Nnaemeka 377)

Following these theorists' thinking, I take the African continent to exist 'only as a function of circulation and circuits' (Mbembe & Nuttall 351) and, as such, analysable only by way of tracing and understanding those circulations and circuits. This thinking makes it all the more important for us to interrogate the 'uni-directional' character of much postcolonial scholarship on Africa, since that uni-directional (and hence imperial) flow is actively forming the continent's imaginary in the academies of the world.⁴

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND THE STRUCTURE OF SCHOLARLY ADDRESS

The problem of the voice of the subaltern other has dominated postcolonial studies from the early work of the Subaltern Studies group onwards. This concern has developed as a rich tradition of postcolonial inquiry, driven by the ethical and political imperative to dismantle the imperial discursive structures (including those embedded in academic inquiry itself) that silence the subaltern. This imperative clearly follows Spivak's initial injunction that we focus on what the subaltern *cannot* say. Yet, irrespective of the nationality, race, gender or class of the scholar, his/her position vis-à-vis the subaltern is *a priori* one of discursive power: the scholar has the capacity to speak *for* or *on behalf of* the subaltern. The danger inherent in the scholar's appropriation of the subaltern voice is described by Spivak herself, while more recent scholars have reasserted the importance of the political and ethical impulse behind the urge to advocate on behalf of the voiceless (see, for example, Sanders 2002; 2007 and Attridge 2004; 2005). Yet we

can decipher a common structure of address in both of these positions: irrespective of whether the scholar appropriates or advocates on behalf of the subaltern voice, what remains is the structure of the encounter, which I would like to describe as one of hospitality.

The scholar, at home in the academic discourses when he/she is discussing texts that engage the predicament of the subaltern, is — we must agree with Spivak — at a significant discursive remove from the subaltern herself. Yet the gesture to recover the voice of the subaltern, and without which the subaltern remains doomed to silence, is certainly a generous one; it is a gesture of hospitality, of making space in the discursive home, for the foreigner (here, he/she who is absent to the discourse). The gesture of hospitality as structuring a form of address is usefully elaborated via Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality* where he reminds us that despite the fact that the foreigner is 'warmly welcomed ... given asylum, [and] has the right to hospitality' (Derrida 11) that 'foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated' (15). Thus, the foreigner 'has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc.' (Derrida 15). We might add 'the scholar' to Derrida's list, bringing new meaning to his observation that the host 'imposes on [the foreigner] translation into [his] own language, and that's the first act of violence' (15). For Derrida, this violence is 'where the question of hospitality begins' (15).

To put this in the idiom of postcolonial studies, we might say that the hospitable gesture towards the voicing of the subaltern is simultaneously a form of epistemic violence in which the subaltern's voice must be articulated in the registers of the academy (*and* in the languages of the dominant culture, to recall Trivedi's concerns above: this is, after all, also a literal translation). Homi Bhabha tries to address this matter by positing what he terms 'a vernacular cosmopolitanism':

Bear in mind, of course, that the 'vernacular' shares an etymological root with the 'domestic' but adds to it — like the "Un" that turns *heimlich* into *unheimlich* — the process and indeed the performance of translation, the desire to make a dialect: to vernacularize is to 'dialectize' as a process; it is not simply to *be* in a dialogic relation with the native or the domestic, but it is to be on the border, *in between*, introducing the global-cosmopolitan 'action at a distance' into the very grounds — now displaced — of the domestic. (Bhabha 48)⁵

It is interesting to note that Bhabha emphasises the language of 'home' and the 'uncanny/un-homely' (in Freud's sense), thereby highlighting the subversive quality of the vernacular that calls the domestic itself into question. Bhabha not only engages the complexities and complicities of this host/foreigner dynamic, but does so in ways that have sought actively to destabilise the very authority of the host-scholar. To return to Derrida's articulation, we are reminded that the foreigner contests the authority of the host (Derrida 5) at the self-same moment

he/she must respond to the host's initial question, 'Who are you?' in a language not his/her own.

What we see in Bhabha's analysis is a shift in critical focus from the voice of the subaltern other to the language scholars use to negotiate the ethics and politics of representing the subaltern. That is, the foreigner's initial challenge to the authority of the host is prioritised, rather than the foreigner's *right to speech* in the home of his/her host. This becomes particularly pertinent when we take the theoretical language of scholarly analysis as our object of inquiry, rather than the cultural or aesthetic texts that those analyses interpret. I would like to make a similar move, suggesting that when it comes to the question of theory on/in Africa, we might do well to question the discursive claims to authority that theory, produced in circuits that have distinctly circumvented Africa, claim over the sign 'Africa'.

AN AFRICAN ACCOUNT OF THE SELF

For Judith Butler, the question ('Who are you?') addressed to the stranger (to be read in our discussion as that person who is other to the discursive home of cultural theory) demands that the other give an account of him/herself. For Butler the call to the other to give an account of him/herself produces (over and above the symbolic violence pointed out by Derrida) an ethical violence, 'which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same' (Butler 2005 42). Such coherence in our account of ourselves is impossible for two key reasons. First, as Butler points out:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine... The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story. (Butler 2001 26)

The first limit to a coherent account of myself (in any context) then, is that the norms and language (let us say the symbolic codes) by which I represent *myself* do not belong to me and do not match my experience of myself. Secondly, the history of the body that houses this 'self' '... is not fully narratable. To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life' (Butler 2005 38).

Now, when the body in question is the African body, discursively written into the thick layers of trauma sedimented by the histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, this ethical violence redoubles; becoming political as well as ethical. This is not to say that the host-scholar intends to assert this violence on the African object of his/her analysis. Indeed, one possible reason as to why it remains so difficult to shift these entrenched discursive positions is precisely because the host-scholar is, in the act of 'doing postcolonial theory' most often driven by the good faith to restore the voice of the African *as a human voice*. That is to say, as Derrida reminds us, the foreigner to whom we address the question 'Who are you?' '... is not simply the absolute other, the barbarian, the savage absolutely excluded and heterogenous' (21). The good faith of the host lies in

his/her curiosity to know the foreigner as man or woman, not as savage. The good faith of the scholar-as-host in postcolonial scholarship has been, further, to invite the narrative of the African subject as an act of historical repair. This takes the form of an appeal to the African to write him/herself over the vacant scar left in discourse by the long histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, all of which perpetuated, to some extent, the non-humanity of the African other. In its restoration of African subjectivity to the realm of the human (yet still foreign) from the realm of the non-human (barbarian), postcolonial theory might, indeed, be considered to have been a resounding success.

Indeed, one might say that it is all the more important that the African give an account of him/herself as ‘self-same and coherent’ precisely because any incoherence or inconsistency in the narrative of the African self is in danger of being recuperated into racist paradigms of thought that constantly seek to attach terms like dishonesty, irrationality, stupidity to the African subject. The African subject (as guest in the house of theory) must self-present as the rational, coherent human *par excellence*.

It is not only theory from an ‘elsewhere’ that has called African subjectivity to account in this way. As Mbembe points out in ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’, the ‘effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else’ (2002 240) can be seen to follow two forms of thinking in Africa, both of which fall into the same logic as I have described above. According to Mbembe, the first, ‘Afro-radicalism’, is trapped in a polemic relationship with those three historical moments considered constitutive of African subjectivity: slavery, colonisation and apartheid. That is to say, as a theory of African subjectivity it ‘contradicts and refutes Western definitions of Africa and Africans by pointing out the falsehoods and bad faith they presuppose’ (244). Furthermore, it:

[disqualifies] the West’s fictional representations of Africa and [refutes] its claim to have a monopoly on the expression of the human in general [as a way] to open up a space in which Africans can finally narrate their own fables. This is supposed to be accomplished through the acquisition of a language and a voice that cannot be imitated because they are, in some sense, authentically Africa’s own. (Mbembe 2002 244)

Mbembe’s analysis is that it is under this ‘guise of “speaking in one’s own voice” [that] the figure of the “native” is reiterated’ (245). This introduces the second form of African thinking critiqued by Mbembe: what he calls the ‘prose of nativism’ (Mbembe 2002, 252). It emerges out of the ‘reconquest of the power to narrate one’s own story — and therefore identity — [that seems] to be necessarily constitutive of any subjectivity’ (255) and it establishes ‘a quasi-equivalence ... between race and geography’ (256).

Both African modes of self-writing, however, articulate themselves against, but tragically reproduce, the racist logic of the Enlightenment. Mbembe writes:

According to [the] darker side of the Enlightenment, Africans developed unique conceptions of society, of the world, and of the good that they did not share with other peoples. It so happened that these conceptions in no way manifested the power of invention and universality peculiar to reason. Nor did Africans' representations, lives, works, languages, or actions — including death — obey any rule or law whose meanings they could, on their own authority, conceive or justify. Because of this radical difference, it was deemed legitimate to exclude them, both *de facto* and *de jure*, from the sphere of full and complete human citizenship: they had nothing to contribute to the work of the universal. (2002 246)

Against the epistemic constraints of Enlightenment thinking, and against the determining histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, Africans strive 'to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty), and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy)' (242). Yet, the voice claimed reiterates Africa's isolation from the circuits and networks of modernity, since it is one that must reiterate authentic African discourses and authentic African identity, as a narrative of the African — and through metonymic slippage, Africa — as self-same (to return us to Butler's words).

The refusal of these discourses to speak themselves in the language of the Western Enlightenment thus fails and capitulates to those very discourses it seeks to refute. Are these narratives of the self not, after all, still trying to prove the humanity of the African? The Western scholar prompting (or demanding) the speech of the postcolonial other through his/her analysis of that other is not dissimilar to the African seeking unique and authentic articulation of his/herself. Both resist the idea that:

Africa as such exists only on the basis of the text that constructs it as the Other's fiction. This text is then accorded a structuring power, to the point that a self that claims to speak with its own, authentic voice always runs the risk of being condemned to express itself in a pre-established discourse that masks its own, censures it, or forces it to imitate. (Mbembe 2002 257)

To escape this discursive trap, the African might then refuse to speak altogether, but that brings us back to the problem of the subaltern who cannot speak. What is the prognosis, then, in light of this epistemic and representational impasse, for African modes of self-expression, theory and theorising?

The strategy taken by Mbembe and Nuttall in answering this question is 'to constitute an argument that relies less on difference — or even originality — than on a fundamental connection to an elsewhere' (Mbembe & Nuttall 351). It is worth citing Mbembe and Nuttall's stance on this matter in some detail:

Though the work of difference has performed important functions in the scholarly practice that sought to undercut imperial paradigms, it is clearly time, in the case of Africa, to revisit the frontiers of commonality and the potential of sameness-as-worldliness. This is a far cry from a proposition that would aim at rehabilitating facile assumptions about universality and particularity. After all, the unity of the world is nothing but its diversity. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, 'the world is a multiplicity of

worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds — within this world.’ As for the ‘sharing of the world,’ it is, fundamentally, the ‘law of the world.’ (Mbembe & Nuttall 351)

Following this logic for our own purposes, we could say that what Nancy’s insistence that ‘... there is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation’ (Nancy 3) suggests that the question of theory in/on Africa is not a question for Africa alone. Instead, the question should be levelled at scholars everywhere, as Nancy’s statement, ‘...this circulation goes in all directions at once’ (Nancy 3) suggests. More radically, Africa is not a question only for scholars of/in Africa. It is a question for all scholarship, no matter its subject. It is to this notion of ‘sharing the world’ that I now turn in an attempt to describe an ethics that may give us critical leverage in the impasse I have outlined above.

TOWARDS AN AWKWARD SILENCE

If we return to one precise moment in Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, we find a small tear in the fabric of the text that opens a possibility for an ethical account of ‘sharing the world’. Discussing Pierre Macherey’s ‘formula for the interpretation of ideology’, Spivak quotes him thus:

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation ‘what it refuses to say’, although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence.

(Macherey 1978 87 qtd in Spivak 81–82)

Spivak’s analysis, as we well know, focuses ultimately on Macherey’s second interpretation of silence (what the text *cannot* say). Yet just as Macherey himself gestures towards the possibility of a new methodology, approaching the matter of what the text *refuses* to say, so too does Spivak comment (briefly) on what this work might involve:

Although the notion ‘what it refuses to say’ might be careless for a literary work, something like a collective ideological refusal can be diagnosed for the codifying legal practice of imperialism... The archival, historiographic, disciplinary-critical and, inevitably, interventionist work involved here is indeed a task of ‘measuring silences’.

(Spivak 82)

This aporia, skipped quickly over in Spivak’s and Macherey’s texts (because of a greater political imperative), indeed opens up a valuable methodological alternative, one that seeks to measure the silences imposed by the (hospitable) request (on behalf of, we could argue, postcolonial theory itself), that the other provide an account of him/herself in the language of the scholar.

On one level, this is precisely the issue Nnaemeka is addressing when she suggests that African theory must modulate its use of theories from elsewhere with the specific cultural terrain of its own spaces. But we might push the matter

further still and suggest that what the African account of the self *refuses* to say may be read *not* as a *measurement* of silence (isn't this, after all, much the same as grappling with what the text cannot say or getting caught in the polemic of the Enlightenment that Mbembe warns us to steer clear of), but rather in letting that silence be.

In its most obvious form, letting the chosen silence of the other 'be' would resist the urge to impose a full and coherent account of subjectivity on African modes of self-writing. Yet surely we cannot afford to let the African self 'be', returned to a silence that reinforces the violence of slavery, colonisation and apartheid? In a world in which the circulation of meaning and theory making is *not* multidirectional we still need a scholarly methodology that will continue to motivate the desire to know about the African experience of history whilst simultaneously acknowledging that that knowledge will never be complete.

In *Sharing the World*, Luce Irigaray interrogates the meanings and values of silence, as a way of forging a new ethics of 'sharing the world'. Her theory starts with the observation that 'possession, subjection, [and] appropriation' have dominated 'monosubjective culture' (Irigaray 4; 2). Thus, for Irigaray, monosubjective culture assumes that the subjectivity of the other is reducible to mine (1). For Irigaray, as for Butler, to reconfigure ethically the relationship with the other requires me to acknowledge that I too am not the self-same. In '[r]ecognizing one's own limits, as well as the [fact that the] existence of the other [is] irreducible to one's own existence' are the first steps towards finding a 'substitute for appropriation' (Irigaray 2).

It is in silence itself that Irigaray posits this new ethics of relationality. She writes:

... silence will no longer be that which has not yet come to language, that which is still lacking words or a sort of ineffability that does not merit interest in language. Silence is the speaking of the threshold. If this silence does not remain present and active, the whole of discourse loses its most important function: communicating and not merely transmitting information. Then dialogue becomes possible. In no dialogue can everything be said, and it is recognizing the necessity of something unspeakable and its preservation that allows an exchange of words between two different subjects.

(Irigaray 5)

Irigaray offers us an account of what the text or narrative of the other might *refuse* to say, without this being reduced to what it *cannot* say. Silence is, thus, not negatively defined (as the failure of language and communication). Irigaray writes, '[relations] between two different subjectivities cannot be set up starting from a shared common meaning, but rather from silence, which each one agrees to respect in order to let the other be' (Irigaray 5).

Irigaray's theory offers us a new approach to the scene of hospitality and its foundational violence of asking the foreigner to account for himself in the language of the host. Irigaray describes the scene of hospitality thus:

We offer to the other that which we unconsciously reserve for ourselves: an enclosed space partly defined around a void... We offer to the other a part of this enclosed

and, in some way, empty, territory — a sort of prison cell, in fact like our own. To be sure, the other will be sheltered, but in an enclosed space, a place already defined by our norms, our rules, our lacks and our voices. The other will have the possibility of dwelling only in a loop of the interlacing of relations where we ourselves are situated by our culture, our language, our surroundings. (Irigaray 23–24)

Thus, as host, ‘... we hardly reach the threshold ... we call to the other ... we invite him, or her, to share our home, without yet leaving a well-known place in order to approach a region that is familiar to us’ (Irigaray 7).⁶ For Irigaray then, true hospitality does not reside in offering space within one’s home for the guest, but in coming to the threshold of the home and meeting the foreigner in a space that is *mutually* unsettling. Therefore, each subjectivity:

has before it a source of words foreign to that in which it dwells —thus not a space opened up by language that is already shared, but a horizon which [sic] opens beyond its limits. (Irigaray 6)

Instead of the structure of address that demands that the foreigner account for himself before the law of the host, this new ethical ideal recommends meeting the other in a threshold place, where the positions of foreigner and host fall away, and in which we allow the silence of the other to ‘be’ (or, in my own phrasing, we allow the other to refuse to account for himself). This is a space that recalls Nnaemeka’s ‘third space’ and Bhabha’s ‘border space’ cited above. For Irigaray, this space is not equivalent to an impossibility of discourse between the two subjects. Rather, she posits a ‘double listening’ between the two strangers, meeting on the threshold, which ‘can prepare the beginnings of a common dwelling’ (Irigaray 14).

This ‘double listening’ is a kind of ‘reciprocal abandon’ (6) of our own positioning within discourse (that is, a coming to the unsettling threshold of our home). The encounter should be a *reciprocal* opening towards the unknown and the strange, rather than a reduction of the other into a nameable object, subject to the law of my home.⁷

Given that I have suggested that the scene of hospitality might be a useful metaphor to understand the problems with theory in its application to the vast continental sign of Africa and its people, what, then, might this reconfiguration of the scene of hospitality bring to the question of postcolonial theory? Instead of suggesting that the non-African scholar must simply avoid writing about African subjects and texts because this is the *authentic* domain, of the African scholar, I would like to reiterate (following Irigaray, Attridge and Sanders) the ethical importance of the curiosity to hear the voice of the other. Yet, if we configure scholarly writing on/in Africa (as we should with all other spaces), as an act of coming to a threshold, as a scholar, I *must*, indeed, am *obliged* to admit my non-knowledge, rather than to perform a complete knowledge of what is posited as a knowable other. Ethics can provide us with a guiding principle in our scholarly pursuits: it requires us to suspend our claims to expertise and knowledge, and to resist the call to the other to give a full and coherent account of himself. It

further requires us to self-reflect critically on our own knowledge paradigms; by entering into the awkward spaces of 'not knowing' we may call into question our knowledge of the world and the tools with which we construct that knowledge. The awkward silences that ensue might prompt real dialogue, respecting both what the other refuses to say and being challenged by entering into the discourse of the foreigner and in listening (albeit partially, incompletely) to what he/she is saying.

This means that knowledge production comes to be a sharing of the world, not in the sense that the world we share is the same (it is not, it can never be), but in the sense that the circuits that create meaning become multidirectional, allowing for participation from all locations and respecting the misunderstandings and confusions that must ensue. If such a dialogue were to structure the address of academic work, we might see a way out of the theoretical impasse we find ourselves in when it comes to 'theory' and 'Africa'. That is to say, theories would circulate through and from Africa, but would make no claim to being autochthonous. Africa would become woven into multidirectional theory-making processes in ways that would be self-evident. At present, this is not the case: the knowledge production industry has by-and-large amputated the entire continent. We think nothing, for example, of an application of Derridean theory to African writing, but using, say, Mbembe's theory to read a novel by a white American male author would require much more complex motivation. African 'theory' in this view of scholarship is only valuable insofar as it contributes to the account of the African self.

In this sense, I would argue, that irrespective of its registers or scope, theory written in Africa or by Africans today is not considered to be theory. This is a profound epistemic and ethical violence that structures contemporary global understandings of knowledge. It also continues the historical violence of slavery, colonisation and apartheid and traps the work we do as scholars in those deeply divisive structures. When any demand is made, specifically of the African, that he/she account for him/herself that demand is historically prescribed in the discourses that make that account a plea for being heard 'as human'. The idea that this act of questioning became one of hospitality, of assuming the humanity of the African, has allowed complacency to enter academic discourse because the act of hospitality is seen as adequate reparation for these violent pasts. Thus, the postcolonial scholar exempts her/himself from shouldering the responsibilities of the slave, colonial and apartheid past, thereby reiterating Deleuze's view, which displeases Spivak so, that theory 'has nothing to do with the signifier'.

What is required is a profound act of self-reflection by the 'global' academy as to how its practices re-inscribe the violence's (symbolic, epistemic, ethical) of those histories that remain constitutive of Africa in the global imaginary. This requires that we open a threshold, in Irigaray's sense, that is deeply self-reflexive and, thus, unsettling. On that threshold we must enter into the awkward silence that may enable a new ethics of theory on/in Africa.

NOTES

- ¹ 'Words and Worlds: Transculturalism, Translation, Identity', Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies. Helsinki, Finland. 26–28th August 2011.
- ² See also Harish Trivedi, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o in conversation'.
- ³ Achille Mbembe's insistence that it is premature to speak of Postcolonial theory, precisely because a sustained and thorough theoretical project has never been consolidated in postcolonial studies, with the result that we have, perhaps, only such a disparate toolbox of critical tools at our disposal in the field, is pertinent. He writes, it is 'an exaggeration to call it a "theory"'. It derives both from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other. It's a fragmented way of thinking...' (Mbembe 2008, 1).
- ⁴ In their ground-breaking *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Aesthetics and Art-making*, Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord challenge methodologies that implicitly reproduce such uni-directional flows of knowledge. The essays collected in their book are exemplary in their redirection of these global flows. Pertinent to my essay is Durrant's own lucid analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as itself part of a broader global tradition of literary modernism, which re-orientates the ways we might have traditionally approached Achebe's perceived realism. Graham Huggan's 'Unsettled Settlers: Postcolonialism, Travelling Theory and the New Migrant Aesthetics' also uses such critical methods to call 'into question the ease with which the experience of migration is accommodated within poststructuralist vocabularies' and considers 'the way in which diverse experiences of migration are homogenized by "travelling" cultural theories' (17). These concerns bear close similarities to my own. There is a great deal more fruitful work to be done in the area of African theory and migratory aesthetics, but it is, unfortunately, beyond the immediate scope of my discussion.
- ⁵ It is worth refracting Bhabha's comments through the prism of Derrida's later reflections on hospitality and cosmopolitanism (see Jacques Derrida *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*), but I do not have the space to do it here.
- ⁶ Irigaray's prose is notoriously awkward, this being her own translation from the French.
- ⁷ Derek Attridge makes a similar point in *The Singularity of Literature* where he suggests that the reader's encounter with a literary work creates the 'possibility not of a new structure of knowledge but of a powerful and repeatable *event* of mental and emotional restructuring' (Attridge 2004, 27). Attridge's argument, though staging many of the ethical steps I am outlining here, hinges on the literariness of the text created in what he calls the 'event' of reading. Thus, while his argument impacts the question of methodology, it does so through the lens of the literary, rather than the theoretical, encounter.

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