



Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts

Khalid Amine, 27 March 2013

“The refusal of Western culture does not in itself constitute a culture, and the delirious roaming around the lost self shall never stir it up from dust.”

(Abdallah Laroui, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*, 1967.)

Contextualizing the Debate

International theatre research has long studied the world before undergoing its revolution from the inside. Should the world study back or, rather, perform back while striving for recognition? The intercultural debate of the 1980s and 1990s implied the possibility of a democratic interweaving of performance cultures across the globe. Still, the task of postcolonial scholarship is further complicated by the existing body of world theatre histories. Our performance cultures are hardly visible in the “universal narrative of capital – History 1”¹, typically edited out, and otherwise often only mentioned on the borderlines between absence and presence. Europe has always been the silent referent in world theatre history. With rising demands for further democratizing the discipline, new modes of writing theatre history from below have emerged with an earnest desire for inclusion. Obviously, “third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate.”² Dipesh Chakrabarty’s attempt to interrupt the totalizing thrust of History 1 is immediately caught in a double bind and was soon problematized by Rustom Bharucha in the margins of his seminal essay “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare”. Chakrabarty’s “historicist debt to Europe had overpowered his critique of Eurocentricity, so much so that (in my reading, at least) Chakrabarty ends up ‘provincializing Bengal’”³ rather than Europe.

We are constantly reminded of Frantz Fanon’s conclusion in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he repudiated the degraded ‘European form’ and called for something different:

¹ Chakrabarty, D., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 254.

² Chakrabarty, D., “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” in *Representations, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, no 37, Winter 1992, pp. 1–26, here pp. 1–2.

³ Bharucha, R., “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization” in *Theatre Journal* no. 54, 2004, pp. 1–28, here p. 21.

“Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe [...]. For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.”⁴ Fanon’s reliance on theoretical Marxism, however, soon undermined his oppositional writing. Unlike Fanon, Chakrabarty ends up proclaiming “an anti colonial spirit of gratitude”: “provincializing Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought. For at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anti colonial spirit of gratitude.”⁵ Such spirit attracts our attention to an ambiguous compromise that is complicit with the radical West in its critique of Eurocentric underpinnings of consumerist modernity, along with the “universal narrative of capital – History 1.”

This is precisely where the Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi’s concept of double critique is effective in problematizing the very notion of the binary: Khatibi’s call is similar to Fanon’s but his strategy deconstructs rather than reverses the language of Manichaeism. His line of questioning disrupts all sorts of binary definitions of Self and Other, East and West. It is essentially a critique that weaves in and out of philosophical lines of influence belonging to both the East and the West. By casting the West as the Other, Fanon runs the risk of homogenizing the multifold West into one single entity. Perhaps it is a tactical move on Fanon’s part in an effort to counter what he sees as Europe’s lack of differentiation of “silent societies” she commonly categorizes as ‘Third World’, ‘under-developed’, or ‘developing’. Khatibi’s call for a *pensée-autre* (a thought of difference) is a third path toward decolonization, a double subversion that strives to elude “wild difference”⁶. This *pensée-autre* is a way of re-thinking difference and identity without recourse to essentialist absolutes and “isms”. It is an “archeology of silence” and a resistance of recuperation within a closed system. The *thought of difference* requires a radical rupture to “escape its own theological and theocratic foundations which characterize the ideology of Islam and of all monotheism.”⁷ Meanwhile, it claims to stand on a different ground than the West; “for we want to uproot Western knowledge from its

⁴ Fanon, F., *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963, pp. 312–316.

⁵ Chakrabarty, D., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, p. 255.

⁶ “Let us name ‘wild difference’, the fake separation which casts the Other into the absolute outside. Wild difference definitely leads to frenzied identities: cultural, historical, ethnic, racial, national It has condemned the West and made it a captive of hostility.” [My own translation.] Khatibi, A., *Double Critique*, Rabat: Oukad Publications, 1990, p. 30.

⁷ Khatibi, A., “Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology” in Halim Barakat (ed.) *Contemporary North Africa: Issues of Development and Integration*, London: Croon Helm, 1985, p. 14.

central place within ourselves, to decenter ourselves with respect to this center, to this origin claimed by the West.”⁸ The transgressive effects of such a critique as a subaltern form of deconstruction are already apparent in its transformation rather than passive borrowing from the radical West.⁹ “The Occident is part of me, a part that I can only deny insofar as I resist all the Occidents and all the Orientals that oppress and disillusion me.”¹⁰

Double critique is a double-edged weapon that is sometimes directed against itself as an “untreated difference”.¹¹ It calls for re-thinking the hegemony of the West and the subordination of the East, the Orient, the Third World, or any number of other names used by the West to designate areas that are not the West, i.e. the global South as opposed to what Spivak calls “the Feudal North in-the-South”. It also calls for re-thinking the Maghreb, the home country, and considering it for what it currently is: a container of multiple identities, a sedimental layering of cultures past and present, in permanent flux between moments of conviviality and tragic sublimity. The Maghreb has long been at the crossroads of civilizations, a point of intersection for various encounters, coveted by different powers, notably Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Spaniards, Portuguese, English, Arabs and Turkish. Double critique is a decolonizing archeology that leads to an examination of the binary concepts of East and West, Occident and Orient, and the philosophical, metaphysical, and theological traditions propagated in each domain. This double-edged critique encompasses a deconstruction of critical discourses on performance that used to speak in the name of the Arab world but was informed by a deeply rooted Eurocentrism. In the meantime, the second critique is a reflection on the ‘politics of nostalgia’ and how the Arabs view their performance cultures. Double critique is an effect of a plural genealogy wherein one stages his/her confrontation of Self and Other, East and West. Khatibi often refers to himself as a ‘professional foreigner’. The question, here, is very much related to the location of exile in any attempt to restore the postcolonial

⁸ Khatibi, A., “Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology”, p. 13.

⁹ Khatibi’s proposition of a thought of difference transcends Hegelian Manichaeisms only to emerge as a deconstructive praxis of difference. It is interesting to note that Khatibi was attentive to the diverse trajectories of Western thought. His reciprocal friendship with Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida is evident from Barthes’ preface to *Maghreb pluriel*, significantly entitled “Ce que je dois à Khatibi” (What I owe to Khatibi). Also, Khatibi’s “La langue de l’autre” is clearly a response to Derrida’s “Le monolinguisme de l’autre”. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Blanchot are also part of Khatibi’s trajectory: “nous prenons en compte non seulement leur style de pensée, mais aussi leur stratégie et leur machinerie de guerre, afin de les mettre au service de notre combat qui est, forcément, une autre conjuration de l’esprit, exigeant une décolonisation effective, une pensée concrète de la différence”. (We take into account not only their mode of thinking, but also their strategy and their war machinery, in order to put them to the service of our fighting, which is inevitably another conspiracy of the mind, requiring an effective decolonization, and a concrete thought of difference.) *Maghreb pluriel*, Paris: Denoël, 1983, p. 20.

¹⁰ Khatibi, A., *La Mémoire tatouée: Autobiographie d’un décolonisé*, Paris: Denoël, 1971, p. 106.)

¹¹ Khatibi, A., *Maghreb pluriel*, p. 50.

subject to his/her humanity. Throughout his lifetime, he tried different genres of writing in an ever-lasting attempt to exile the consciousness of exile.

The Postcolonial Turn and Double Resistance

The subaltern theatre scholar becomes the translator of a body of writings that was “formed elsewhere and whose archeological questions, most of the time, he/she hardly doubts. Frightened by the intellectual production of the West and by a process of accelerated accumulation, the researcher is satisfied with constructing, in the shadow of the Western episteme, a second knowledge that is residual and that satisfies no one.”¹² His/her task is made more difficult and risky. The provincialization of Eurocentric theatre scholarship can only be achieved by recovering the irreducible plurality and age-old interweaving between European theatre with other histories and traditions. How to retrieve such repressed histories and articulate subaltern positions in their name without falling into the essentialist creed of ‘wild difference’, ‘deviant nationalism’, or worse, as Chakrabarty puts it, “the sin of sins, nostalgia”, still constitutes one of the fundamental difficulties facing postcolonial historians and critics.¹³ Our re-siting of the intercultural theatre debate in the post-colony known today as the “South”¹⁴ raises the following questions: What is the task of Arabic performance research in an era of globalization? Is there still a global divide between affluent countries and wretched ones as far as theatre practice is concerned?

The Napoleonic military expedition to Egypt and Syria (1798–1801) has ever since marked the beginning of a conflicting interplay between modernity and colonialism. The ‘Molièrization’ of Arab stages and the desire of the Arabs to appropriate Western models of theatre production came as an effect of this interplay.

Napoleon’s¹⁵ introduction of theatre was aimed to serve two main objectives: 1) as a means of entertainment for the soldiers and 2) as an agency aimed at changing people’s

¹² Khatibi, A., “Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology”, p. 16.

¹³ Chakrabarty, D., “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, *Representations*, no. 37, pp. 2–4.

¹⁴ As the site of diverse historical, literary, cultural and artistic convergences, the South has been and continues to be the quintessential postcolonial space for created hybridities and cultural pluralism. While ample attention has been given to this space in its historically global relations, it is equally important to further investigate, as Hardt and Negri put it, “the production of locality”. The SOUTH within the current global economic system is literally the rest of the world, located outside of the G8 countries of the North and of what Spivak calls “the Feudal North in-the-South”.

¹⁵ On 22 August 1799, Napoleon wrote an important note to his successor, General Kléber, explaining the imperative of theatre activity: “I have already asked several times for a troupe of comedians. I will make a special point of sending you one. This item is of great importance for the army and as the means of beginning to change the customs of the country.”

traditions and implementing the French civilizing mission. Indeed, the Napoleonic aspirations echo Karl Marx's thesis on British colonialism and its double mission in a supposedly backward India: "England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia."¹⁶ The destructive task led to the breaking up of the native communities and the uprooting of the local industry, whereas the regenerative undertaking pursued the path of modernizing India. The impact on India was so deep that Indians found themselves between two exits: that of the East that refuses to close totally and that of the West that refuses to open far and wide. Khatibi provides an important reading of Marx's terrifying statement: "the murder of the traditions of the other and the liquidation of its past are necessary so that the West, while seizing the world, can expand beyond its limits while remaining unchanged in the end. The East must be shaken up in order to come back to the West."¹⁷ The introduction of European theatrical traditions was utilized as a means to bring the East back to the West. Theatre in the Arab world was from the start 'deterritorialized', perhaps even trapped in an ambiguous compromise and confronted with the necessity to interpolate between different performance cultures and discursive structures. The result is not a return to any illusive authentic state, but a creation of what Homi K. Bhabha calls "thirdness" as both a 'de-sovereignizing' and 'aporetic' space and an openness of 'binarity'. It is precisely this openness that makes the 'Interweaving Performance Cultures' project an urgent call for transcending the polarities of East/West within a global environment.

The postcolonial turn requires an evaluation of all different 'Occidents' and 'Orients' that produced us as postcolonial subjects. Accordingly, double critique invites us to redeem postcolonial performance history from its interminable oppositional thinking "by shifting the postcolonial subject's fixation on the Other/West to an inward interrogation of his political and ideological self-colonization and self-victimization."¹⁸ The two disparate paths chosen by the people of the Maghreb as a means to re-construct a postcolonial society risk relapsing into essentializing creeds: in choosing to seek refuge in the past, they turn their backs on the Western influence that has become part of our heritage ever since Greco-Roman presence in *Tamazgha* and other parts of what is now the Arab world. This tendency has led some to worship ancestral ways of performing everyday life and,

¹⁶ Marx, K., "The Future Results of British Rule in India", *New-York Daily Tribune*, August 8, 1853; reprinted in the *New-York Semi-Weekly Tribune*, no. 856, 9 August 1853. URL: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm [last accessed: 04.12.2011].

¹⁷ Khatibi, A., "Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology", p. 12.

¹⁸ Hamil, M., "Interrogating Identity: Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 22, 2002, pp. 72–86.

eventually, to a nostalgic quest for an elusive origin. The rebirth of theatrical pan-Arabism in the late 1960s exemplifies such a painful process of renewal. Arab nationalism, as has mostly been performed on Arab stages, seems to reenact the same violence against its internal others, including the native non-Arabs such as the Imazeghen people in North Africa (also known as Berbers). However, in choosing to blindly appropriate the Western path, they also revert to another kind of essentialism, which sees European theatre as a unique and homogeneous epitome that should be disseminated all over the world even at the expense of other peoples' performative agencies.

Decolonizing the Maghrebi theatre practice from Western '*Telos*' or '*Vorhaben*' does not mean a recuperation of a pure and original performance tradition that pre-existed colonial encounters, past and present. Arabocentrism, Tamazghocentrism, Afrocentrism all inevitably lapse into inverted violence and dangerous quests for purity. Does there even exist the possibility of returning to an 'authentic' state? There is no way back to an authentic or pure state, since all locations are somehow contaminated and criss-crossed by various encounters past and present. The Maghreb is made up of so many different cultural and historical influences and one cannot simply turn one's back on any of them. In line with Erika Fischer-Lichte's inspiring Interweaving project, I believe that cultures absorb material vestiges, remnants, echoes, remains and tattoos of a silent history that is quite literally inaccessible until subjected to an archaeology of silence and a process of transcription or translation. Double critique re-evaluates that very landscape and highlights the multiple crossroads and palimpsests of interweaving and underlying acts of arche-writing.

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