



TRACES - A SPEECH TO AFRICAN NATIONS

INTERVIEW WITH ÉTIENNE MINOUNGOU AND FELWINE SARR

Felwine Sarr, after *Afrotopia*, an essay about “Africa in movement,” you’re once again exploring the future of this continent-world, this time with a poetic odyssey: that of a man returning home after a long journey. Under what circumstances was this *Speech to African nations* born? What does it say, and to whom? Did you write it for Étienne Minoungou, actor, director, and founder of the Festival Les Récréâtrales in Ouagadougou?

Felwine Sarr: Patrick Colpé, the director of the Théâtre de Namur, asked me to write a text as a sort of echo to Ascanio Celestini and David Murgia’s *Discours à la nation (Speech to the Nation)*, which he’d programmed. He also introduced me to Étienne Minoungou. I knew of him because I’d heard his performance of Aimé Césaire’s *Journal of a Homecoming*, seen his interpretation of Dieudonné Niangouna’s *M’appelle Mohamed Ali (My Name is Muhammad Ali)*, and *Si nous voulons vivre (If we want to live)*, which he’d created based on columns and interviews by Sony LabouTansy, another Congolese writer. I invited him for a cultural event I organise in Dakar, *Les Ateliers de la pensée*. He’s an amazing actor. He can embody anything. He’s a storyteller, and I wrote this text with his particular way of speaking in mind, his prosody. Right away, I had the idea of a direct address to the audience. I could have written a text about Africa with numbers and statistics, in the present tense. I’m an economist, I know how to say things in essays, but I wanted to talk to youth with a text that wasn’t all raw reality—even though it’s at the crossroads of several dynamics. I think poetry shines a different light on reality. It takes us out of the present. There’s an archaic power to it which touches at the essence of things, not to its occurrences. I wanted this sort of illuminating writing. *Traces* is addressed to the youth of Africa, to the lifeblood of the continent who thinks, often as a form of defiance, that their East is still the West. This mythological text, this long metaphorical march of human existence, looks back on the history of Africa without resentment or complaint, to go towards a form of awakening, a luminous engagement. That’s what the youth of Africa needs today to fully explore their presence in the world at a particular moment in the contemporary history of Africa that finally allows them to do it. We live in a time where African nations are learning to reconfigure forms and to create their own destiny. This text says that it’s time to stand up, to find our humanity again, to reduce the darkness Africans still carry within themselves to try to find our light, our own collective power. This text is a reminder to youth that Africa has a long, rich, and complex history, not only colonial and postcolonial, and that we must now leave this season of shadow that in no way reflects our destiny and that of our youth.

Étienne Minoungou, what did you feel upon reading this text? What do you think it is about? How did you make it yours?

Étienne Minoungou: I usually dive into texts very quickly, but not this time! It’s dense, complex, it has many layers. It’s a secret text which requires you to be in a specific state of mind to see it as a show. But little by little, by talking it over with Aristide Tarnagda, I think I managed to find its deeper meaning. Under the watchful eye of Felwine Sarr, Aristide and I were able to reorganise the text to be able to perform it. We gave it a dramatic movement, asking ourselves how to start a conversation, how to establish an atmosphere, how to show its strength and power. With musician Simon Winse, who plays both the musical bow and the Fula flute, bringing together traditional melodies and jazzy sounds, we tried to give this text a fairy tale dimension, to fill the space, to create breaths between the words. The music echoes the lyrical aspect of the text while preserving the space of the word because *Traces* isn’t about a character but about a shared moment in time, an embodied thought. *Speech to African Nations* tells the story of a man who returns to the continent of his birth. Standing alone in front of the others, he tells the world what he saw, what he sees, what here is still weighed down by the rubble of history. He shows that a way forward is possible, a future, a hope, a different destiny. This text speaks to the youth of the world, explains things calmly, talks about what really happened. I think this *Speech* says that life passes but that we’re here to prolong the trace of light it leaves behind. It’s wonderful for me who have always looked for unique spaces where to speak. With this text, this long address, I found an agora, a place where things emerge, where we can share.

Felwine Sarr, as co-author of the report on the restitution of African cultural heritage, memory is at the heart of your artistic, academic, and political engagement. The show, at different stages in its creation, has been performed in Africa, in Dakar for the inauguration of the Museum of Black Civilisations, and in the West, in Cologne. How did people react? What is the state of creation in Africa today?

Felwine Sarr: In Dakar, this text had an important impact. I think it awoke in the audience something of the feeling of dignity to regain, the desire to encourage a different kind of speech than which that denies and belittles. I also heard from European spectators, who seemed to focus solely on the part about the role of the West in the history of the African continent when the text is not about this kind of binary analysis, and never accusatory. We are all dependent on a memory, on independent subjects whose vision was influenced by so many films and books, a whole slew of orientalist or exotic representations. We were all impacted by it, but westerners still struggle with accepting the opaque dimension of the mirror. They, too, need to make an effort to change the way they look at Africa. From that point of view, the role of art is absolutely fundamental. In addition to the challenges we're facing in terms of economy, education, security, and democracy, there is also a cultural and artistic challenge: to reconfigure our imagination. It is only by rising to this challenge to we will be able to establish a new look, a new humanity, a new destiny. I think that it all depends on the way we'll reconfigure our relationship to the world. We have to build the needed psychic infrastructure, put luminous humanity back at the heart of the societal question, and only individuals can do that. Today, culture isn't a priority for the various African governments, which would rather invest into more technical spaces. It's therefore people working in the field who can enact a real change, at their own level. The risk of an externalisation of endogenous culture is real, but there is a real grassroots movement as well. African artists are learning more and more to create based on their constraints. The hard part is making sure that creative freedom remains a reality in Africa and isn't seized upon by external agents. There's a real demand from programme directors in the North who are looking for shows that will appeal to their audience. It leads to even more of a power imbalance. But more and more renowned artists now have the power to say no. In that regard, to be programmed at the Festival d'Avignon with such a demanding text shows that there are now spaces in Europe willing to engage with people who want to say something really different. It's a sign that things are moving, that trends are reversing.

Étienne Minoungou: Dakar was an incredible moment. The quiet strength of the text, without false anger or judgment, moved the audience deeply. I did feel that those questions were relatively new to the audience in Cologne, but they listened very closely, and perceived an essential dimension of the text: it's not meant to divide, but to invite us to a collective meditation about the future, about our destiny. The cultural landscape in Africa is shifting, finding a structure, and trying more and more to escape market-driven logics to return to aesthetics singularities. The last few years have seen the emergence of several cultural experiments, new forms of circulation for artists and their productions—within the Francophone space in particular. New networks have appeared. This new generation has created a new dynamic, which will allow African nations to build things in a different way. For I think the poetic word can allow us to build a collective future.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu the 23rd January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach