For a Poetics of Immateriality

Simon Njami

I don't know anything about Africa. I don't want to know anything about it, so I can continue to discover it, to learn about it. You can't get to know a continent. In Cameroon, where my family comes from, I am a stranger – but not any stranger. My virtual, recomposed memory is a guarantee of my belonging. I remember things I have never experienced. When I walk in a city like Yaoundé, I always feel like an explorer venturing into an unknown and perhaps hostile country for the very first time. My African world has long been limited to a few houses and two cities, which I barely remember. I have never moved beyond Yaoundé, in that Islamic, nomadic, arid North where men and women seem to have stepped out of a different book from the one I read. Their beauty has nothing to do with what I thought I knew, with the people of the forest. Their languages are different and foreign to me. To tell the truth, beyond this symbolic frontier represented by the capital, another country begins – and its reasons are imprinted in my memory – a country that I can't "think" of, a country that doesn't exist. A non-country. A mirage. An illusion. A country whose blurred borders have been banished from the memory of my family. The postman who became President came from there, from the bowels of that arid earth. In my view, this land is still the symbol of the evil caused by one single person. And its inhabitants are all responsible for that. Their innocence doesn't count. It is a personal matter, definitely an irrational one.

I walk down a long avenue named after a date I no longer remember. It was surely a milestone in the history of my country. I walk past the Hilton Hotel. This avenue is too large for this city. Cars seem to get lost into it. When I get to the post office junction, my attention is drawn to a traffic hold-up caused by a horseman galloping his horse around the traffic circle. He doesn't listen to the horns and to the hail of insults directed at him. He is a man from the North. He exudes that sort of slowness, a noble bearing that bewitches me, as if his time were not our concern. He turns off into some side street and disappears. I believe I have caught in his eyes a longing for an inaccessible elsewhere. As a child, I used to see them at the markets. They came from the mountains, from arid clearings without factories, to sell their leather goods: bags, traditional weapons, slippers, coin purses… We weren't allowed to speak to them. They didn't deserve that sort of ostracism, of course. But the memory of my folks is stubborn.

So I walked through the streets of Jerusalem, following strangers who led me back to the right track when I was lost. I was a foreigner. A tourist. And I could shamelessly throw myself into the wholeness of what I was discovering, eager to understand everything. No unnecessary sense of belonging held me back. It was probably this responsiveness, this particular open-mindedness that allowed me to better understand the world. This so-called "belonging" blinds us. It creates duties that we are not always able to perform, for the sake of the survival of our ancestral world. But isn't this ancestral heritage an indefectible element of our self-perception? Is there another way to look at ourselves, to be rooted in a given place or in any sort of geographical entity, apart from this emotional rapture, this arbitrary and exclusive appropriation? It is as when we read a book and imagine our heroes, and then we watch a film taken from that book. The film clashes with the one we

have imagined. The pictures interfere with each other; they mix together and cancel each other. Where is the reality we were referring to? It no longer exists. We are alone again. A little more alone than before. And we are left with this revelation of a bustling and vibrating world that constantly evolves outside us, a world that reminds us of an old fireside story we have never known. People's faces look both familiar and unknown, their familiarity coming from the fact that, after all, they are anchored somewhere.

This anchorage, once again, only depends on my subjectivity and on my need to see all the strangers I meet as brothers. The illusion of African brotherhood arises from these mazes, which allow us to truly feel African only after we cast ourselves out of Africa. My first Cameroonian friends – or rather, I should say, African – were people from Paris or elsewhere. It is a sort of return to ourselves, which happens as soon as we become aware of this necessary affinity. The artificial aspect that is often a prelude to these meetings doesn't really matter. There's no getting away. We can't reject a man coming toward us, holding his hand out and calling us *brother*, although we may feel a little bit awkward, as if an exclusive word had been usurped. Whenever I hear this word uttered by others, addressed to me, a part of me can't help but smile or grimace at this deception. This happens with words that are a prerogative of my brother or my sister, with whom we constituted, or constitute, a clan that is impermeable to any intrusion. We experience our Africanness in the inner circle of our home, among the ghosts we have been brought up with.

People around us reawaken this Africanness, this profound atavism. I remember. It was a sunny day. People were laughing and talking loud, in a language I couldn't quite understand; they bustled around calling me "dad", "daddy". I remember the look in my father's eyes. My mother's smile. It was the first time I set foot in this country, which was also my own. My only horizons, until then, had been snowy fields and pointed roofs and the light of the fireplace. White Christmases. I remember. I'm back. Over and over again. I learned to understand and speak the Bassa language from my grandfather's words and gestures. Their faces have aged. But the memory of this other life, of this christening, this initiation, remains vivid. My skin, my feet, my eyes know what I ignore. Here I will never be completely lost. I know this red earth. So red. It is the earth of the forest country. I know these broad-hipped women. I know this child who could be my son and who now turns to me with a triumphant smile.

You need to go through a country, through a continent, to catch the uncatchable. I remember my bus or train journeys. Did I really take them or is it, once again, a stratification of memories taken from others? I remember hectic, noisy atmospheres. Farmyard animals, crowds of men and women, children screaming: Africa.

Edea was an epiphany. I still remember this little girl selling peanuts. She spoke Bassa. I suddenly realised I was in my country, a country where everyone spoke the language of my parents. My language. Africa does not easily allow this total sense of belonging. French is the only language everyone understands. With English, it is a little less so. What is a nation, if not a language? This little girl was speaking Bassa. I owe all my epiphanies to this Bassa language, to the trap of the signifier against the signified, and to the inevitable bastardisation to which we are all active or passive contributors. Our maternal tongue is supposed to be our mother's tongue, but it rather means "mother tongue". Was my mother a language or is it French, which is the language I speak less badly, that once again might fill this gap? A bastard, according to the macho connotation

still implied in the word, is a child who has not been recognised by his father. He is an illegitimate being. Paradoxically, there is no corresponding word for a motherless child. Perhaps, it depends on the fact that the obtuse spirits of the past drew on the physiological assumption that a child always comes out of a woman's womb. The bastard is the child without a father. This happens in a system where the attribution of a name – that is, our social existence – necessarily comes from the father. The mother is a presence that is never called into question. But I wonder whether it would be possible to reverse the burden of proof. After all, if my mother disappeared, who would I be? And what would become of this mother tongue on which I was weaned?

This language I was hearing all around me and Edea was her own language. When we were children, in Europe, she did her best, along with my father, to pass on this anchorage to us. So we could somehow find ourselves in that country we had never known, and which – they were aware of it – would never be completely ours. Language was therefore the only possible territory for us. The echoes of that strange music were supposed to bring us back to an inalienable sense of belonging. A legitimacy. Language, according to my parents, was both a real and imaginary country, a country that we could only approach in the intimacy of our words and family circle. It was a bewitching initiation. My parents wished we could think just like them. Following the Hegelian principle according to which we think through words, they wanted us to think in Bassa, in the language and as members of a community, because the name of a language is often confused with that of one's nationality. An Englishman speaks English. A German speaks German. What the hell is the language spoken by people whose language does not correspond to their nation? What language do Americans or Mexicans speak? A language is just a mirage if it is not associated with the images it refers to. It only exists in the truth of the things it evokes. Otherwise it is just a combination of abstract and empty signs. The signs we learned from our parents were associated with subliminal images. Their ghosts have become ours. In our mind, this country, which is also ours, was just the ghost of a ghost.

We need to go beyond words to grasp the hidden meaning of words. Sometimes I wonder if we are not all forced, each in our own way, to comply with this never-ending semantic negotiation. We can only feel at home in a language as long as this language speaks to us and conveys our individual feelings as faithfully as possible. In writing, this process becomes even more radical, as our goal is not to communicate with the other, but with ourselves, in a language that, no matter how familiar it may be, always remains problematic. This is what Haitian writer René Depestre meant when he wrote: "I took the French language and I turn it into a bastard". Language is emblematic. It anticipates an ideal world to the extent that it teaches us not to trust purity, which is a dangerous myth whose absurdity has already been proved over the last century.

As a child, language was a mystery to me. Today it appears even more unattainable than before. I like the shock of the unusual encounter, the gestural expressiveness, the obscure ballet evoked by oral language. A language is first spoken, before being written. That's why Gustave Flaubert felt the need to take refuge in his "gueuloir" ("yelling place"), where he tested his drafts by reading them out loud.

I remember a film I happened to catch a glimpse of. Were Were Liking, a poet and playwright, was answering the questions of a journalist. Were was talking about the Bassa people. She started saying that the Bassa people, where she came from, had never

produced anything valuable in the art field, unlike the Bamouns or the Bamilekes, whose works were instead displayed in all ethnological museums of the world. I didn't expect I would feel so deeply affected by those words. My Bassa feeling and pride had been wounded, and, what's more, by a "sister". My reaction surprised me: it was a sign of a strong sense of belonging and identification that, until then, I had never questioned.

It proved, better than any other discourse, that my parents had perhaps succeeded in their project of turning me into a real "Bassa", through the simple magic of our language. On the screen, Were continued to say that Bassa people had never sculpted because they had no veneration for materiality, for the permanence and physical appearance of things. Their place of choice was language, and they had become master of it.

You might be wondering, and quite rightly, what these vaguely autobiographical notes have to do with a text that should be talking about a virtual exhibition, about notebooks, contemporary art, Africa. The fact is, in a continent where oral language still remains the main medium of communication, the fictitious space of a screen reflects a real fiction. Art is a mirror, a double mirror reflecting an infinite *mise en abyme*: the fiction becomes the reality of a fiction that is nothing but reality, in an infinite circle. As Boris Vian wrote: "This story is true, because I invented it from beginning to end". He could also have said the opposite. This story is fictitious because it reproduces reality. But what is reality if not a subjective projection, a point of view? In the art field, the materialisation of a concept or of a story clearly shows this impossibility of capturing the world as a whole. We can only catch some fragments of it. How would it be possible for us to think of our existence in the world, or in any sort of environment, if we didn't introduce a manipulation that would allow us to fill the voids that are beyond our reach? Art does nothing but this: it gives us the illusion of a structured world. The structure of this world is inscribed in the lines and between the lines of a work in art, in a story that, according to the Aristotelian precepts, has a beginning and an end. But there is no beginning or end. There are just fragments, pieces, moments. Life is nothing but an operation of transubstantiation, a useful illusion that keeps us from going crazy. Fairy tales are another kind of narrative that is very close to reality because it makes it clear, right from the start, that it is just an illusion. It is only this initial assumption that allows us to step through the looking glass and catch a glimpse of reality, because reality can only be caught allegorically, metaphorically.

We could compare the artistic creation to a literary work. This means that the ways of representation of an original African space – but this is not just about Africa – should be searched in the African culture itself. There's a lot of talk about the "magic realism" of such Latin-American writers as Gabriel García Márques. I think that Africa shouldn't be cut out of this family. All African languages are in fact based on oral tradition. In the narratives, the interaction is constant; bouncing from a story to another, related to the same topic, the narrator takes the liberty of enriching his narrative with inventions. This way, the script becomes a symbolic conceptual plot, which, as in "exquisite corpses", changes and evolves depending on the narrator. This way the initial story may happen to be completely

different from the final one. After all, what really matters is not what is told, but what is understood.

A piece of writing is not encumbered with psychology, because action is consubstantial with our unconscious, which urges us to act. So, the psychology of African narratives is not conveyed by long sibylline monologues, but by actions, which retrospectively establish a field of reflection. In other words, this means that, in theory, there is no point in knowing how a narrative ends, because the end is not the aim of the narrative. It is the narrative itself that determines its own object. As a consequence, descriptions have nothing to do with the symbolism dear to nineteenth-century Western writers, but are a vehicle for actions. Since action complies with the imperative of narrative, the reality as we perceive it becomes an obstacle that the narrator doesn't accept, as his primary objective, which he pursues at all costs, is to keep the readers in suspense. As long as the story unfolds in a convincing way, a narrative can also be unrealistic. We can therefore say that, even without a theoretical foundation, African narratives are close to the spiritual naturalism advocated by Huysmans. So, in order to create a story or a film, you don't need to have great ideas, but great actions. As in Stevenson's works, "adventure is the very pulse of tales".

This exhibition, in spite of its technological support, conveys African time better than any other device. African time couldn't be limited to the space of a museum. Museums are a European invention. Animist Africa believes in signs, in metaphors, in the pleasant lie of human creation.

This collection of notebooks, each with its own character and identity, is like the refection of an African thought in action, the expression of a continent whose history is first of all immaterial.