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The Global Perspectives of her Art: Monmouth College Interviews Writer and Painter Véronique Tadjó

Amongst Francophone African women writers today, it would be challenging to find an artist with the talents of Veronique Tadjó, in whom we find the genius of a painter, a novelist, and a poet. Tadjó was born in the Ivory Coast in 1955 to a French mother and Ivoirian father and raised in Ivory Coast. She studied at Abidjan University, receiving her BA and later teaching there. Tadjó won her doctorate in African-American Studies from Sorbonne-Paris IV.

Veronique Tadjó's extensive poetry, novels, and children's literature have been translated into many languages, but she may be most well known for her collection of poetry, *Latérites* (Collection Monde Noir, 1997) and fiction, *Le Royaume aveugle* (2000) and *Reine Pokou* (Actes Sud, 2005), along with such children's books as *La Chanson de la vie et autres histoires* (Hatier, 1993) and *Mamy Wata et le monstre* (Hachette, 2000). Tadjó won the Literary Prize of L'Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique in 1983, the UNICEF Prize in 1993, and, most recently, the *Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire* in 2005. While Tadjó's literary works focus on a dizzying array of themes, she is particularly interested in exploring women's lives, globalization, exile, and diaspora in relationship to Africa. Although her mother was a sculptor and painter, Tadjó taught herself to paint, and combines her talents in writing and painting to conduct many workshops on book illustration for children. Married to a journalist, Tadjó has traveled to England, Mexico, Nigeria, and Kenya, and currently lives in South Africa with her husband and children. She is Head of French Studies in the School of Literature and Language Studies at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

In 1998, Tadjó was invited with nine other African writers to visit Rwanda to bear witness to the genocide that took place in 1994. During her time there, she visited orphans, rape victims, prisoners, and massacre sites in the name of understanding the spiritual legacy of genocide. Following her voyage, she wrote *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda* (2002), an affirmation of her commitment to Africa as well as her identity as a global citizen. This travel narrative, along with the recurrent theme of the mask as a source of sacred creative and spiritual inspiration for Tadjó and her West African community, were the focus of the following interview.

Professors Heather Brady and James Bukari welcomed the opportunity to host Véronique Tadjó at Monmouth College during the 34th Annual Meeting of the African Literature Association, held from April 22 to 27, 2008 at Western Illinois University. As representatives of the Department of Modern Foreign Languages, they had the privilege of hosting Tadjó on April 24, 2008. During her campus visit, Tadjó gave a presentation on her paintings entitled, "The Power of African Images: From Written to Painted Narratives." She also graciously attended Professor Bukari's "Global Perspectives" course, speaking with students about her works of art and answering questions about ethnic conflict, specifically about the Rwandan genocide she wrote of in *The Shadow of Imana*. Tadjó agreed to an interview with Monmouth College professors and members of the French Club. The interview was translated by James Bukari, Heather Brady, and French Club member Dan Bansley. Other participants in the interview process included French students Erin Deford, Erin Degelman, Sarah Evans, and Justin Lee.

INTERVIEW IN FRENCH

Comment le voyage enrichit-il votre vie ? (apporte-t-il une richesse spirituelle, intellectuelle, culturelle, artistique) Dans quelle mesure le voyage a-t-il avancé votre création artistique ?

Voyager m'apporte beaucoup parce que cela me permet de relativiser les choses. J'arrive mieux à comprendre que l'on n'est pas toujours obligé de faire ou de penser comme les autres. En effet, ailleurs, les gens se comportent peut-être différemment. J'ai toujours pensé que le monde était une île et qu'il fallait la découvrir autant que possible. Il y a tellement de choses à apprendre. Par exemple : les spiritualités peuvent être différentes, mais le but est le même, trouver un sens à notre vie. Les arts aussi changent d'expression, mais c'est encore le désir de se dépasser et de laisser des traces de notre existence sur terre qui nous poussent à créer. Nous réfléchissons parfois avec des outils intellectuels différents, mais nous faisons pourtant face à des problèmes similaires. Les voyages m'offrent donc d'autres approches, des alternatives, des pistes de réflexion.

Vous êtes née en France et vous avez vécu dans plusieurs pays africains. Quel rôle vos racines jouent-elles dans votre vision du monde ou dans votre création artistique ?

Je suis née en France, cependant, j'ai vécu la plus grande partie de ma vie sur le continent africain. Je suis donc très attachée à mes racines. Au niveau de l'écriture et de la peinture, je puise mon inspiration dans mon expérience vécue. Je me sens profondément engagée envers le continent africain, parce que c'est sur lequel j'ai vécu le plus longtemps et où je me sens la plus utile.

Mais, de plus en plus, je me rends compte qu'il faut avoir une approche globale. Nous sommes tous sur le même « bateau », c'est-à-dire que nous sommes tous liés les uns autres puisque nous partageons la même terre. Il faut donc toujours essayer de voir plus loin que son environnement immédiat.

Votre livre L'Ombre d'Imana est le récit de votre voyage au Rwanda, mais aussi un témoignage de l'horreur du génocide. En témoignant les vestiges du passé vous constatez le monde actuel dans lequel vous vous engagez politiquement. Dans notre monde rempli de divisions ethniques et religieuses qu'est-ce que nous pouvons faire (nous, les étudiants américains, ou les américains plus généralement) pour dépasser les divisions ethniques et religieuses ?

Je pense que où que l'on se trouve, il est important de rester vigilants, d'ouvrir les yeux. Il faut être des citoyens actifs qui ne laissent pas leur gouvernement tout décider pour eux. Le génocide au Rwanda s'est passé en Afrique, mais comme vous le savez, il y en a eu d'autres dans l'histoire humaine, l'Holocauste étant le plus connu. Ainsi, ce n'est pas une question de couleur de peau, mais plutôt de nature humaine. Nous sommes capables du meilleur et du pire.

Il ne faut pas tomber dans le piège des idéologies artificielles et dangereuses qui peuvent surgir dans n'importe quel pays. Les phénomènes de racisme, de xénophobie, d'ethnicité et de rejet de l'Autre sont souvent exacerbés par des manipulations à des fins politiques.

Pour moi, l'important c'est de rester informée sur ce qui se passe dans le monde et sur les dérives possibles. Nous ne voulons pas de 3^{ème} guerre mondiale ! Il faut faire pression sur nos dirigeants.

Nous sommes frappés par la présence importante des masques dans votre œuvre. Qu'est-ce qu'ils peuvent communiquer ? Et qu'est-ce que vous pouvez communiquer à travers les masques ?

Les masques sont en Afrique de l'Ouest un symbole de spiritualité et de puissance culturelle. Il existait des religions africaines avant la colonisation. Pour moi, les masques sont aussi un exemple de la grande créativité artistique traditionnelle. Il y a de toutes les formes et pour toutes les occasions ! Leur puissance d'évocation est très grande. Savez-vous que Picasso s'est inspiré de l'art africain dans sa peinture ? Il a été profondément touché par la dimension symbolique des masques et des statuettes africaines.

Vous avez de la chance de pouvoir vous exprimer dans les divers médias tels que la poésie, les contes d'enfant, le récit de voyage, le roman et la peinture, mais comment parvenez-vous à naviguer les contours de ces différents modes de création artistiques, en restant la même personne ?

La réponse est peut-être dans le fait que je sois née de deux cultures, c'est-à-dire de la rencontre de mon père (Ivoirien) avec ma mère (Française). J'ai donc très vite compris que je n'étais pas obligée d'être une seule chose et que si je voulais être sincère envers moi-même, je devais reconnaître ma pluralité culturelle. Il y a donc de multiples influences en moi et j'en suis très heureuse. Dans l'art, ce qui m'intéresse le plus, c'est le processus de création. Que j'écrive, que je fasse de la peinture ou de la photographie, pour moi, l'important c'est de créer, de trouver des manières différentes de dire.

En traversant les frontières d'un nouveau pays, on veut souvent s'assimiler, s'acculturer ou s'adapter. A travers ce processus on acquiert une ouverture sur le monde qui n'a pas existé avant. On peut aussi perdre une partie de notre identité. Qu'est-ce que le processus d'acculturation vous a appris quand vous étiez plus jeune ? Et aujourd'hui dans quel sens ces leçons sont-elles différentes ?

Oui, je suis d'accord avec vous. Il y a toujours le danger de se perdre dans une autre culture. Mais je pense que si on possède un bagage culturel suffisamment solide, alors on peut apprendre beaucoup des gens que l'on rencontre. J'ai fait des séjours et des études aux Etats-Unis qui m'ont beaucoup apporté intellectuellement et culturellement. Je vis en Afrique du Sud actuellement. C'est un privilège de pouvoir observer de si près les changements qui s'opèrent dans la société depuis la fin de l'apartheid. L'Histoire y est encore récente. Pouvoir participer à cette grande transformation, même à un niveau tout à fait personnel, est passionnant.

INTERVIEW TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

How does traveling enrich your life? (Does it enrich you spiritually, intellectually, culturally, artistically?) To what degree have your travels advanced your artistic creation?

Traveling has been really great for me because it allows me to put things into perspective. I reach a better understanding that we are not always compelled to act or think like others. Indeed, people may behave differently elsewhere. I have always thought that the world was an island and that it was necessary to discover it as much as possible. There is so much to learn. For example: spirituality may be different for each person, but the goal is the same, to find a meaning to life. The arts also change in expression, but the desire to go past our limits and leave traces of our existence on earth still inspires us to create. Sometimes we think by means of different intellectual tools, yet we nonetheless face similar problems. Travel therefore offers me other approaches, alternatives, channels of reflection.

You were born in France and you have lived in so many African countries. What role do your roots play in your vision of the world or in your artistic creation?

I was born in France; however, I have lived a good part of my life on the African continent. I am therefore very attached to my roots. As far as writing and painting are concerned, I draw inspiration from my lived experience. I feel profoundly committed to the African continent, because that is where I have lived most of my life and where I feel I am most needed.

However, I realize more and more that it is necessary to have a global approach. We are all in the same “boat”; that is to say, we are all connected to one another since we share the same world. It is therefore necessary to always see beyond one’s immediate environment.

Your book The Shadow of Imana is the account of your travels in Rwanda, but also a testimony of the horror of genocide. By witnessing the remnants of the past, you observe the contemporary world in which you are politically engaged. In a world full of ethnic and religious division, what can we do (as American students or Americans, generally) to overcome ethnic and religious divisions?

I think that wherever one lives, it is important to remain vigilant, to keep one’s eyes open. We need to be engaged citizens who do not let their governments make all the decisions for them. The genocide in Rwanda happened in Africa, but, as you know, there have been others in human history, the Holocaust being the most well known. Thus, it is not a question of skin color, but rather of human nature. We are capable of the best and the worst.

We must not fall into the trap of artificial and dangerous ideologies, which can emerge in any country. The phenomena of racism, xenophobia, ethnicity, and the rejection of the Other are often exacerbated by politically motivated manipulations.

For me, what is important is to stay well informed about what is happening in the world and about possible drifts from the norm. We do not want a third World War! We must keep our leaders on their toes.

We are struck by the considerable presence of masks in your work. What message do they convey? And what are you able to communicate through masks?

In West Africa masks are a symbol of spirituality and cultural vitality. African religions existed before colonization. For me, masks are also an example of great, traditional artistic creativity. There are all sorts of masks for all kinds of occasions. Their evocative power is quite great. Do you know that Picasso took inspiration from African art for his paintings? He was profoundly moved by the symbolic dimension of masks and African statuettes.

You are fortunate to be able to express yourself in diverse forms such as poetry, children's books, travel narratives, novels, and paintings; how do you succeed in navigating the contours of all these different modes of artistic creation while remaining the same person?

The response probably lies in the fact that I have been born of two cultures, that is to say the meeting of my father (Ivoirian) with my mother (French). I quickly understood that I was not required to be only one thing and that if I wanted to be true to myself, I would have to acknowledge my cultural plurality. There are multiple influences in me and I am happy with that. In art, what interests me the most is the process of creation. Whether I write, paint, or make photographs, for me the important thing is to create, to find different ways to say something.

We often want to assimilate, acculturate or adapt ourselves when crossing the borders of a new country. Through this process we acquire an opening into the world that was not there before. In this process, we can also lose a part of our identity. What did the processes of acculturation teach you when you were younger? And today, in what sense are these lessons different?

Yes, I agree with you. There is always the great danger of losing yourself in another culture. But I think that if one possesses solid cultural baggage, one can learn a lot about the people one meets. I have visited and studied in the United States, and these sojourns have taught me a lot intellectually and culturally. I currently live in South Africa. It is a privilege to be able to closely watch the changes happening in the society since the end of Apartheid. History there is still recent. To be able to participate in this great transformation, even on a completely personal level, is thrilling.

Authors

Heather Brady is Associate Professor of Modern Foreign Languages at Monmouth College in Illinois. She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Texas at Austin, and currently teaches French and Francophone literature. Her research broadly focuses on travel literature as well as literature and immigration in Marseilles. James Bukari, Visiting Assistant Professor, came to Monmouth College from Purdue University, where he received his Ph.D. in Education. He teaches courses in French, education and global issues. Dan Bansley is a senior French and International Business Major at Monmouth College. Originally from Chicago, Dan will be studying abroad in France in spring 2010, then pursuing a career in translation after graduation.