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Translator's Preface

Catherine A. F. MacGillivray

Marie-Léontine Tsibinda Bilombo was born in Girard in the Congo. Her parents were farmers, and she lived with them during the school holidays. She went to Secondary school and University in Brazzaville where she obtained a Masters in English (*Maîtrise en Littératures et Civilisations Américaines*). During the course of her life she has lived in various Congolese towns (Girard, Dolisie, Les Saras, Pointe-Noire, Bounda). She has also traveled outside her country (Zaire, the Ivory Coast, Belgium, France, the United States). She is married with children and worked as a librarian at the American Cultural Centre in Brazzaville (1997). Because of Congo's civil war, she had to flee her country in 1999 and took refuge first in Niamay, later in Cotonou and eventually in Canada (2002). Over the years, she has taken part in many literary Conferences organized by the Arts Faculty of Brazzaville University. She is a member of the PEN CLUB International, was the secretary of the Association *AGIR phurriel* and the treasurer of the Congolese Writers National Association. Between 1979 and 1987 she was also a member of Sony Labou Tansi's Rocado Zulu Theatrical Company. In 1981, she received the National Prize for Poetry and in 1996, the Prize Unesco-Aschberg for her novel, *Les pagnes mouillés*.

Tsibinda is hailed in Congo-Brazzaville and in the francophone world in general as the most important living Congolese woman writer; indeed, in 1981 she received her country's National Prize for Poetry for her volume entitled *Poèmes de la Terre* (Poems of the Earth). Tsibinda has long been interested in questions regarding the postcolonial condition and political fate of the Republic of Congo—and of Subsaharan Africa in general; the particular plight of African women; her love of her native land—especially its rainforest—and the beautiful poignancy of children and motherhood; these are examples of some of the themes present in the poems she has written, two of which are offered here. Her native village of Girard—where she grew up in a farming family surrounded by brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, an illiterate mother and a semi-literate father—also plays an important role in her work. As Mme. Tsibinda has said, "All I have to do is close my eyes and I find the secret corner of my childhood, a corner which

gives me a second wind, that allows me to manage space, my other space" (translation mine).

The contemporary African cultural scene--particularly in the areas of writing, folklore, postcolonialism, and an ongoing exploration of négritude--exercises a greater and greater influence in the field of international literary study here in the U.S. and throughout the world. I am pleased to have the opportunity in this journal to introduce the English-speaking community to the poetry of this prominent Congolese woman writer. As Tsibinda herself has pointed out, "We can never speak enough about Africa. About this Africa that is eating its own entrails . . . Africa is killing Africa, thus opening the door to any and all catastrophes. The artist will continue to cry out, for as long as the massacre endures" (my translation).

Lastly, I would like to speak as well about the meaning and value of the work I do--work that all of us featured here in this issue do--as literary translator. As I think this journal will show, literary translation is a serious art form that too often receives little understanding or appreciation. To translate a literary work requires an acute awareness of the possibilities for nuance and play in both languages. In addition, translators must take care not only to speak, read and understand their source language fluently, but also to be fully cognizant of cultural influences, differences, and history--as well as being a consummate and critical reader of their chosen author's complete body of work. This is to say nothing of the demands of prosody--of sound effects like meter and rhyme--which plague and inspire all translators of poetry. It is a game of loss but also of gain--or so one trusts. Translating Marie-Léontine Tsibinda's poems provided me with many such challenges, as well as many consequent rewards.

Poésies / Poems

RÉSISTER ... EXISTE

On m'a dit que là-bas
bousiller un noir
est chose courante

on m'a dit que là-bas
le noir n'a aucune
place chez lui

on m'a dit que là-bas
le noir est traité
comme du fumier

on me crie apartheid
est-ce vraiment nouveau
on me crie racisme
qui a créé ce mot
on me crie séparatisme
à quand l'unisson
on me crie abolition des classes
qui en accentue la différence

a-t-on oublié que là-bas
un noir sait ce qu'il veut
a-t-on oublié que là-bas
un noir ne craint rien
a-t-on oublié que là-bas

Selected Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda Bilombo

Translated by Catherine A. F. MacGillivray

RESISTANCE . . . EXISTS

They tell me that over there
butchering blacks
is common

they tell me that over there
blacks have no place
like home

they tell me that over there
blacks are treated
like trash

they shout apartheid at me
is it really so new
they shout racism at me
who invented this word
they shout segregation at me
why trumpet this word
they shout separatism at me
when will there be unity
they shout abolish the class system
it dwells on differences

have you forgotten that over there
blacks know what they want
have you forgotten that over there
blacks fear nothing
have you forgotten that over there

résister... existe

Ici le noir s'enfonce dans la nuit
 pour une poignée de francs
 le noir bâtit la tour de la nuit
 le noir séquestre le noir
 le noir chasse le noir
 le noir vole le noir
 le noir opprime le noir
 le noir lynche le noir
 le noir trahit le noir

Quels néologismes
 a-t-on trouvés
 pour le comoufrage?

resistance . . . exists

Here black digs in the night
 for a fistful of francs
 black builds the tower of night
 black sequesters black
 black hunts black
 black robs black
 black oppresses black
 black lynches black
 black betrays black

What new words
 have we found
 for camouflage?

COMME EPITAPHE

Quand on tue
l'Afrique
la terre entière saigne
le ciel verse des larmes de sang
les forêts se tordent
les chairs explosent
les os se rompent hideux
des géants tombent

l'Afrique saigne

la lune et le ciel se perdent
dans un océan
irradié et immense
de sang des cris d'enfants
otages d'un destin sans cesse
cruel

on traîne l'Afrique
dans la boue
dans le sang

plane l'aile du vautour
guettant encore et encore
des chairs à déchirer

tuez l'Afrique
bombardez l'Afrique
mitraillez l'Afrique
liquidez l'Afrique
brûlez l'Afrique
réduisez-la à zéro
piétinez-la

AS EPITAPH

When we kill
Africa
the whole world bleeds
the sky weeps tears of blood
the forests twist and bend
flesh bursts
bones break horridly
giants fall

Africa bleeds

the moon and sky are lost
in an ocean
shiny and immense
with the blood of the cries of children
hostages to a destiny endlessly
cruel

we drag Africa
through the mud
through the blood

vultures glide on the wing
on the lookout again and again
for flesh to tear

kill Africa
bombard Africa
machine-gun Africa
liquidate Africa
burn Africa
reduce her to nothing
trample her

écrasez-la
sucez le suc à fric

Afrique
cette Afrique
qui nous tient

mais quand viendra
l'ultime rôle
et que sera ensevelie
cette mère en lambeaux

sur la tombe
ne crachez point
écrivez comme épitaphe
"ci-gît la torche-à-fric
amour de toujours..."

crush her
suck the sap
from the pulp
of Africa

Africa
this Africa
who cradles us

but when the last rattle
comes
and this mother in tatters
is to be buried

do not spit
on her tomb
write --as epitaph--
"here lies the light of Africa
love eternal . . ."