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Marissa Compton

Black Intellectuals: The Transient Space of Cultural Translation

Among many other striking similarities between Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* is the figure of the black intellectual and the storylines surrounding this figure. These characters allow the authors to engage in a larger conversation concerning intellectuals in the black community. At the time these plays were written (1970 for *Les Blancs* and 1975 for *Horseman*), there was considerable international anxiety surrounding the role of black intellectuals in their communities. Frantz Fanon, an intellectual turned rebel from Nigeria, claims that the intellectual "has family obligations and duties that extend to the mass of people. The life or death of that expansive kinship is determined by the willingness of its members to . . . suffer its common vulnerabilities and victories" (Joy 58). American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argues that "the black intellectual's aspirations toward white privilege, and his self-doubt, temporized his commitment" and make it difficult for black intellectuals to fulfill their obligations, as these inclinations towards privilege and doubt "do not permit him to fully accept his role as a champion of black people" (Chrisman 67). Hansberry and Soyinka's discussion of black intellectuals enters into this conversation, dramatizing the difficulties intellectuals face in fulfilling the expected role. Interestingly, both authors initially highlight the scholar's in-betweenness as a seemingly positive mediatory position that allows for cultural translation and negotiation. However, despite this initially positive perspective, Soyinka and Hansberry's explorations of this mediatory role and its advantages ultimately adds weight the authors' dramatization of the inadequacies of mediation and their advocacy for black intellectuals' full and necessarily sacrificial commitment to their community.

Hansberry's Olunde and Soyinka's Tshembe both occupy the controversial position of black intellectuals, a position marked not only by their education but also by their unique ability to step outside colonial and native culture. Both Olunde and Tshembe are sons of deceased or soon-to-be deceased chieftains, and both return from Europe after an extensive stay in order to attend their fathers' funerals. As sons of deceased chieftains, both men must confront the cultural mantle they are meant to inherit from their fathers. This inheritance is complicated by their time away and educational experience abroad, experiences that create distance from both indigenous and European cultures and societies, allowing them to become cultural translators.

Olunde's position as a distanced observer of both British and Yoruba ideologies gives him a more critical and expansive view of his people and the Europeans. Olunde operates outside of British culture, as evidenced by his criticism of it and the ways in which he positions himself to it. In particular, he criticizes European ethnocentricity, explaining to Jane Pilkings that the concept that "everything which appears to make sense was learnt from *you*" is "yet another error into which *your* people fall" (Soyinka 43, emphasis added). Olunde emphasizes the distance between the Europeans and himself in his use of "you" and "your," indicating that he is not a part of that cultural group. His distance from European culture is further emphasized by his criticism of its lack of self-awareness. As Summer Pervez explains, "Olunde is able to reveal British customs . . . [and] successfully undermine British authority" (Pervez 70). It is interesting to note that Olunde chooses to undermine British authority, but what is more notable is that Olunde makes these critiques successfully. As an outsider, Olunde can see European contradictions clearly, because he is not participating in them.

Olunde is distanced from his home community as well as from British society. Mark Ralph-Bowman claims that "despite his 'sober western suit' Olunde turns out to be a man whose

experience of the world outside has brought a deeper understanding of his heritage” and references Olunde’s later ritualistic suicide as evidence of the “depth of Olunde’s convictions” (Ralph-Bowman 86). However, Ralph-Bowman does not fully address the complexities of Olunde’s position. Olunde, while in support of the Yoruba traditions, does not to fully subscribe to them. When he sees Jane Pilkings wearing an egungun mask, which is holy and associated with death in Yoruba culture, he is not fearful but instead asks, “Why should I be [shocked]?” (Soyinka 41). While still understanding this sacred part of Yoruban cosmology, Olunde no longer subscribes to the fear associated with these masks. He may not agree with the Pilkings’ use of culturally sacred objects, but he also does not seem to believe that this insensitivity will have spiritual repercussions the way that the others in his society do. Even the members of the community that have converted to other religions regard the frivolous use of the masks with “disbelief and horror” (Soyinka 18). Even Amusa, a Muslim “native administration policeman” and an African character extremely distanced from local society and ideology, tells Pilkings that the masks “belong to dead cult, not for human being” and refuses to talk to speak to the couple while they wear the masks (Soyinka 19). In contrast, Olunde’s lack of fear indicates that he is no longer submerged in Yoruban society and culture.

Olunde’s distance from his community is also evident in his plans to return to Europe. When Jane fears that Olunde’s distaste for British culture will prevent him from continuing his education in Britain, he says, “What a strange idea. I intend to return and complete my training” (Soyinka 45). Despite his uncomfortable experiences in Europe, he admits that the West does have worthwhile knowledge, high among it “the art of survival” (Soyinka 43). Although Olunde loves his community and advocates for them, he also is distanced enough to see the advantages of a European education and fully intends to claim those advantages. While he ultimately fulfills

his duties as his father's son, he does not feel the need to fulfill further obligations to his community, at least not immediately.

Tshembe's life runs in a similar pattern to Olunde's, as his life abroad gives him both familiarity and distance from culture of the colonizers and colonized. Tshembe's travel experience allows him to have, as he says, "the kind of vantage point given to an outsider" (*Les Blancs* 72). Tshembe uses this outsider understanding to criticize much of European culture, including Christianity, which he calls "another cult" and which he mocks for finding "reason in a bit of dirty ash" (*Les Blancs* 61). Tshembe's disregard for that which is traditionally sacred to Western nations is a sign of his outside-ness in relation to them. Rather than being culturally colonized by his experiences, those experiences allow him to perceive flaws within Western culture.

Tshembe is similarly distanced from his native customs, although he is perhaps more forgiving of their incongruity. Though Tshembe fully intends to participate in his father's death ceremony, he does not have faith in it the way that his fellow villagers do. When his Christian brother asked, "Do you believe in any of it?" Tshembe responds, "Of course I don't believe in it . . . [but] we are our father's sons" (*Les Blancs* 61). As Olga Barrios explains, Tshembe participates in the ceremony "primarily out of respect for his father and not out of any belief in it" (34). That Tshembe claim that "of course" he does not believe indicates that Tshembe finds faith in such beliefs to be not only unnecessary but, for someone in his position, unimaginable (*Les Blancs* 61). Though Tshembe is willing to participate in his culture, it no longer carries spiritual weight for him.

Further, while Tshembe repeatedly refers to the villagers as "our people" (*Les Blancs* 61, 63, 94), he too wishes to return to his life in Europe. He tells an American reporter that he plans

on working with textiles, saying, “I’ll be taking some samples back to Europe” (*Les Blancs* 89). Not only does Tshembe intend to return to Europe, he means to continue building a life there. He is starting a business, which indicates that Europe is his long-term home. Even later, when Tshembe feels the tugging needs of his community, he tells the woman who partially raised him, “I know what I’d like to do. I’d like to become an expert at diapering my son . . . to sit in Hyde Park with a faded volume of Shakespeare and come home to a dinner of fried bananas with kidney pie. . . . I want to go *home*” (*Les Blancs* 125). Tshembe is drawn back to Europe by its opportunities, and even seems to have more sentimental value for Europe than Olunde does. It has become his home. His son and European wife give him blood ties to the land, and Tshembe does not seem to feel much resentment for the West. Instead, he embraces parts of it, such as kidney pie and Shakespeare. Thus for much of the play, Tshembe articulates a separateness from his African brothers and sisters by expressing a guarded affinity to European culture.

The distance from home culture and community that Hansberry and Soyinka represent is an important part of the larger conversation that they enter into and an important element that Fanon and Frazier criticize in that larger conversation. Fanon in particular emphasizes the importance of black intellectuals taking on the hardships of the community. He explains that it is vital that “the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact *everyone* will be discovered by the troops, *everyone* will be massacred—or *everyone* will be saved” (Fanon 47). And yet, Fanon is concerned that “the native intellectual has clothed his aggressiveness in his barely veiled desire to assimilate himself into the colonial world” (Fanon 60). Such a desire is understandable, particularly in Tshembe’s case where there are both economic and sentimental advantages to assimilation. However, while such desires may be understandable, they are simultaneously calamitous for the community at large, since they may lead to intellectuals

refusing the communal burden and thus fracturing what Fanon refers to as a “spiritual component” (Joy 58).

Soyinka and Hansberry respond to fears such as Fanon and Frazier’s and while both are ultimately critical of the intellectual’s separateness, they originally imply that it can be useful, in that it allows intellectuals to act as translators and mediators between the communities. While the outside is not a place in which the playwrights allow their characters is allowed to remain, the authors present it as a position in which negotiation can occur. The intellectual characters are able to translate between the two cultures, making them one of the few viable ways in which the two societies can communicate and negotiate. Within these plays, in-between Black intellectual figures are positioned as *the* hope for a nonviolent resolution and revolution.

Olunde’s positive work as mediator and translator is clearest in his conversation with Jane Pilkings, perhaps the most sympathetic European character in the play. Midway through their conversation Jane asserts, “I feel the need to understand all I can . . . At least you can explain” (Soyinka 46). Jane recognizes Olunde as a cultural translator, a person who understands enough about both cultures to build a bridge between them. Olunde is able to explain the necessity of his father’s death in Yoruba cosmology and the way in which it is necessary for “the welfare of [his] people” (46). His act of translation signals his unique position within the play, because only as a figure of hybridity is he able to help a colonizer begin to understand Yoruban thought. Perez recognizes Olunde’s position of uniqueness, noting, “Olunde is the single character . . . who is able to enter into a useful debate . . . regarding cultural relativity” (Perez 69). Because of his outsider status, Olunde is the only figure in the play who is truly able to mediate a dialogue between both cultures. As such, Olunde is the hope for a peaceful resolution between the communities.

Tshembe plays a similar role, mediating between cultures when he explains European customs to his brother Eric and, perhaps more notably, effectively challenging the American reporter Charlie's simplistic view of the treatment of blacks in both Africa and the United States. When Charlie visits Tshembe's hut in a show of respect, Tshembe explains, "In your own country you would not be paying tribute to this place, you would be campaigning to get it closed!" (*Les Blancs* 93). Tshembe recognizes Charlie's double standards, helping Charlie see that an alliance with Africans that neglects African Americans is not a true alliance. He also challenges Charlie's condemnation of the "terrorists," African rebels resisting colonial rule. Charlie encourages Tshembe to denounce them, but Tshembe refuses to do so, explaining, "We have been saying [the black man wishes freedom] for generations. They only listen now because they are forced. Take away the violence and who will hear the man of peace?" (*Les Blancs* 91). Tshembe is able to enter a critical conversation with Charlie partly because of his intellectual background. Tshembe knows the history of colonialism as told by both sides. As such, he is able to explain to Charlie the complexity of the situation and the necessity of violence in overthrowing colonial oppressors. Phillip Effiong argues that "Hansberry advances the need for dialogue between the oppressed and the oppressor" (273), and in *Les Blancs* Tshembe is shown to be the vehicle through which such dialogue can take place.

Both Olunde and Tshembe stand apart from the communities that they are associated with and view the good and the hypocrisy in each culture, which is a valuable state of liminality. However, while this in-betweenness has the potential to be useful, and appears to be the only way in which Africans and Europeans can have productive conversations, both Hansberry and Soyinka show this position as both problematic and transient. As Tshembe

explains to Charlie, productive conversations, ultimately, are not enough to prevent the climatic cultural breaking point that occurs in both plays.

Until Olunde's father, Elesin, fails to commit the ritual suicide, it was possible for Olunde to straddle the line between the two communities. He was able to assert the validity of the Yoruba's cultural claims while still "intend[ing] to return and complete [his] training" (Soyinka 45). However, when it becomes apparent that his father has failed, partly due to interference on the Europeans' part, Olunde recognizes this as "a profound assault on the Yoruba consciousness" (Pervez 69). Jasbir Jain claims that at this juncture "Olunde is left with hardly any option but to fall into his father's unfulfilled role" (255) and "because 'he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors' [he] has stopped it with his life" (275). This analysis, however, is a slight oversimplification. Olunde does have options—his options are to abandon his community to cultural destruction or to give up his life to save it. The option that Olunde no longer has is to mediate and negotiate. He can no longer stand on the fringes as an African intellectual. Olunde says that his father's failure to die means "A calamity for us, the entire people" (Soyinka 47). Olunde realizes that his father's failure threatens possible collapse of Yoruban cultural beliefs and signifies the breaking point in the cultural conflict, thus Olunde is forced to choose a side. Without Olunde's intervention, the Yoruba cosmology will falter, signifying British success in the cultural conflict. His full devotion becomes the defining factor in this cultural battle. As such, Olunde chooses to die in order to prevent his home community from calamity (Soyinka 47). In choosing death and his community, Olunde forsakes his role as liminal translator.

Tshembe likewise must choose a side when he sees his community in chaos. Before Kumalo, the negotiator for African autonomy, is arrested, Tshembe plans to leave Africa and maintain his liminal status (*Les Blancs* 97). However, Kumalo's arrest ends Tshembe's hope that

this conflict can be mediated. When Charlie assures Tshembe that he will make sure that Washington knows about it, Tshembe only replies, “They *know* about it in Washington” as he backs away slowly (Hansberry 106). Tshembe slowly decides that his role as mediator is not enough and he must stay and fight for his kin. He is urged on in this decision by the woman seen first in the prologue, who Tshembe says was once called “Joan of Arc! Queen Esther! La Pasionara!” (*Les Blancs* 81). Tshembe fights this dancing spirit’s summons throughout the play despite the fact that he “has no doubt about the truth of what the spirit tells him concerning what is rotten in his country.” However, he “is not sure whether his greater duty is to this woman warrior . . . or to the white wife and son that he left in England” (Barrios 28). Ultimately, Tshembe realizes that he must relinquish his in-between role, signified by his European family, to fight for his African family.

It is not until his conversation with Madame, the woman who raised him, that Tshembe truly gives up his role as translator. She urges him to stay and fight for his country, because “Africa needs warriors . . . *Warriors*, Tshembe. Now more than ever” (*Les Blancs* 126). Madame seems to have been Tshembe’s link to all things good in European culture. After Madame gives her permission, Tshembe murders his Christian brother, who was an agent and symbol of colonialism (*Les Blancs* 128). Just as in *Horseman*, the connection between the European and indigenous culture snaps and Tshembe must decide between turning his back and letting his community fall to ruin or staying and fighting, giving up the life he built in Europe. He forsakes his role as father, husband, and mediator in order to become the warrior his community needs.

Though Soyinka and Hansberry both display the advantages of the in-between role, their ultimate message is that it is not enough. By acknowledging the advantages in the intellectual’s liminal role and then highlighting the cultural break, both authors emphasize that negotiations,

while useful in their moment, will ultimately fail without violence. The failure of the cultural translators to make any lasting difference through their mediations and their ultimate turn to violence is used to indicate that liminality and moderation is insufficient. For, as Tshembe says, “Take away the violence and who will hear the man of peace?” (*Les Blancs* 91). In both plays, a traumatic incident drives the communities apart so drastically that it is no longer possible for the intellectual to stand between them, and both characters are forced to make a choice between the two worlds they occupy.

It is significant that neither Soyinka nor Hansberry allow their characters to remain in mediative positions, but force the conflict to a climax that necessitates a choice. That both authors do so signifies the inevitability of such a climax and such a choice. In Edward Said’s book *Representations of the Intellectual*, he too admits to the necessity of this decision. He says that “the major choice faced by the intellectual is whether to be allied with the stability of the victors and the rulers or . . . to consider that stability as a state of emergency threatening the less fortunate with the danger of complete extinctions” (35). There is no in-between in Said’s argument, or in Hansberry or Soyinka’s literature. Hansberry and Soyinka allow their characters to straddle cultures temporarily, but only use that in-betweenness to highlight the necessity of choosing. Neither deviate from Fanon’s argument that “No one has clean hands; there are no innocents and no onlookers . . . Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor” (Fanon 199). While the intellectuals in these plays are understandably hesitant to relinquish their roles of privilege, and while the mediation role offers some benefits, this liminal space of cultural translation is transient. The authors dramatize the advantages of cultural translation only to make its failure more complete and dramatic. Ultimately, both argue that intellectuals must either fight alongside their African brothers and sisters or become cowards and traitors.

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