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Titre : *Playing with one's food (for thought): the food motif in French contemporary diasporic theatre*

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First of all, let me warmly thank the organizers for putting this conference together and for inviting me. This is an extremely interesting event which proves – if it need be – that food is a prism through which scores of other topics can be creatively envisaged.

I am a French lecturer in English, and I have lately focused my research on the food motif in English political theatre, notably in Edward Bond's work where it is prevalent. But starting from there I felt like checking what was also going on at home with maybe the idea of comparing food presence on both English and French stages, at a later stage. This conference gave me some direction for exploring theatre in my own country, and for this also, thank you very much. What I am going to present now is the beginning of this project that I am looking forward to developing in the coming years.

As surprising as it may seem, food is not that present on the French contemporary diasporic stage. Perhaps playwrights split between France and another *terroir* feel inhibited by the enormity of the French food culture? Nevertheless, the fact is that precisely where one would expect to find scores of these prime cultural tags that food items and cuisine are, one is left a bit hungry.

Of course, there are some examples. But I found them in pieces of relatively inferior artistic quality. I am thinking of plays like Farid Omri's *Bacon Couscous*, staging a mixed North-African and French couple. In this charming comedy the triumph of love over cultural differences is symbolised by the fusion of the 2 food items in the oxymoronic (but no doubt delicious) dish mentioned in the title. However, we are talking about a quite traditionally written mainstream comedy, here.

True, some more elaborate pieces also use the food motif as a direct symbol of a particular diasporic identity. Fellag in *How to Prepare a Good Little Couscous* turns it into the emblem of his original Maghreb: "... couscous represents our deepest identity, since, as common saying goes, Maghrebi are couscous, in the same way that English people are *rosbifs* and Italians macaroni". But in his play, the food motif is not just a cultural signpost. It also serves other, more central functions, that enrich the dramatic text. In this way, Fellag and the other playwrights I am going to mention are heirs to the great ancestors of French diasporic contemporary theatre, Samuel Beckett (Irish) and Eugène Ionesco (Rumanian and French).

In Beckett and Ionesco's works, the food motif is never used as an ethnic label, a vehicle for nostalgia about a lost country or as the emblem of a particular cultural mix, but rather – and right from the start – as a properly dramatic constituent, that is to say as an element which helps them develop their original thought through the medium of theatre. And their thought is a structural one, focused on a (the?) general frame within which individual stories take place. What I mean by

that is that both playwrights use the food motif to express their conception of humanity as a whole.

Of course, writing in a second language and in a country whose secular and democratic tradition protected them from the stranglehold of politics or religion unfettered their writing, freed it from verisimilitude and stretched dramatic expressivity as far as it could go. Without the food motif taking a more prevalent place than others in their plays, Beckett and Ionesco's unbridled expressivity allowed its evocative qualities to start blossoming on the French stage.

Thus, for example, to render his flawed vision of humanity, Beckett uses the food motif inversely. The nothingness which frames, and thereby invalidates Mankind's existential experience is at work inside his characters. It devours them from within, making them thinner and thinner one play after the other, until they remain like voice or even just breath presences. It may be paradoxical in a country that sees itself as the birthplace of gastronomy, but the first apparition of the food motif on the French (diasporic) stage is an "anti-motif": the force which, in Beckett's plays, drives humanity towards death rather than towards life. However, this "anti-motif" proved very fruitful. It revolutionized dramatic writing as, for the first time, it gave material stage expression to a void, a shortage. The freedom from plausible reference allowed Beckett to have the lack of food bear the metaphysical concept of a fundamental satiety forever escaping humankind. Man is forever hungry for transcendence, but he can never reach it.

Ionesco too uses food items to deplore the transcendence-free human condition. But he rather points to the all-pervasiveness of materiality through the proliferation of objects on stage. Thus, in *Victims of Duty* he has the stage filled with cups of coffee by Madeleine, a conservative bourgeois, when she carries out a hundredfold the demand of the authoritarian Policeman to bring him a cup of coffee. For Ionesco, matter (and so, also edible matter) is an evil force which thrives when spirituality is absent, like the eggs that Roberte lays in hundreds in *The Future is in Eggs*, and that are destined to become "de la chair à saucisson" ("sausage-meat / cannon fodder").

Beckett and Ionesco's propensity to use the food motif to contextualize human behaviour, to depict the framework which conditions Mankind's existence, is still to be found among diasporic playwrights to this day. Even if not all of them are as metaphysical as their illustrious predecessors, and if, for each of them, this context is different (political, or sociological, or historical, etc.), it is almost always foremost in their plays.

In *Europe Connexion* for example, the background is political. In it, Alexandra Badea depicts the effects, but also the causes of the psychological collapse of a parliamentary assistant working at the European commission. His burn-out does not result so much from the work pace there, than from the moral contortions he has to go through in order to keep his self-respect when pushing laws half-proposed half-imposed by the industrial lobbies which run the world. It is no chance that Badea has him work at the "environment, public health and food security" sub-commission, where he actively pushes regulations limiting food labelling to "basic information only", or outlawing seeds that are not owned by industrial groups, or legalizing carcinogenic pesticides. This character falls physically and morally apart when accepting to be a cog in a machine designed to exploit his fellowman to death. At the hands of industry, food serves the opposite of its original nourishing function. It "fattens" some happy few but devours most people who live

by it. Europe's multicultural ideal is seen as an ideological gadget of very little weight compared to the structural reality of things, and the main character's collapse mirrors that of his corrupt world which is no longer designed to feed him.

Interestingly, even when it is not overtly posited, the general framework is present in some plays as a watermark, a nearly invisible but nonetheless essential bone-structure. It is notably the case with playwrights of French West Indian or of African origin, a number of whom stage their stories in terms of power relationships modelled upon the colonial motif of cannibalism. Thus, José Pliya in *Cannibales* explores the journey which leads to the eventual acceptance of a child's death in terms of incorporation, including the incorporation of grief itself. "Like the cannibal warriors who used to eat their enemy's heart so as to incorporate his strength, [the character called Nicole] decides to eat the object of her grief together with all the clichés, the preconceived ideas, the idols of social representation which go along with it." Even more explicitly, Gaël Octavia, in *Conger Eel and Lobster*, likens the relationship of a man and his wife's lover to that of these two animals, both linked by "a happy and straightforward" association since they are respectively predator and prey to the same creature, the octopus. "The octopus gobbles up the lobster and the conger eel gobbles up the octopus." Eat or be eaten is also how Papa sees life in Marie N'Diaye's *Papa must eat*, where Papa, accusing white society of having sucked, digested and left him powerless, decides to get his own back by returning to his French family to bleed them dry.

But the food motif does not only serve to capture the overall picture. It also serves diasporic playwrights to think up all these various frames, as well as what is at play inside them. Many of them use it as a dramatic constituent for its expressive properties which help them formalize their conception of the world. Just as Beckett had used its anemizing effect, or Ionesco its subjugating effect to shape their vision of humanity, contemporary playwrights also use the food motif to make the stage speak their own language.

Quite evidently, very often, food will be a major actancial force. In *Europe Connexion*, for example, it is the moral charge borne by the food motif which holds up the main character's dream career plan, and therefore moves the play forward.

But the agency of food objects is also used to shape playwrights' ideas. Quite a few diasporic plays involve the audience in some culinary action that is part of the play. For example, in *Sicilia*, Clyde Chabot, welcomes the audience with great care. They are first seated around a table partially set with glasses, small plates, and napkins, and strewn with objects, some of them visible (wine bottles, bread baskets, numerous photographs), and some hidden under cloths. They are then drawn into the tale of Chabot's trip in search of her lost Sicilian origins thanks to the photographs they are invited to pick up, examine, and circulate. The involvement in a common experience will deepen when Chabot finally unveils the hidden peppered pecorino cheese, "the only cultural element to have been passed on to her", she says. The revelation-like unveiling of the cheese, followed by its sharing among the audience along with Sicilian wine, turn it into the centre of a communion which unites the table-companions together, as well as with the playwright. Each person's individuality is at the same time erased, since the tasting is experienced by everybody, but also celebrated, since it also calls upon each and everybody's personal memories. Dramatized in that way, the cheese manifests a particular conception of humanity, as made up of entities distinct from one-another but also stock-related.

So, one has to admit that the food motif in contemporary French diasporic theatre is quite intellectual in nature, since it serves to draw a context before telling a story within it, as well as to formalise general concepts. What I would like to suggest as an open conclusion, is that ~~maybe~~ the food motif also serves another function: that of protecting diasporic playwrights' pride. Indeed, the complexity of mixed identities as well as that of inter- and trans- cultural relationships is such that it is challenging for someone split between *terroirs* to claim full legitimacy to one of them without feeling awkward or even ashamed. One of the strategies to bypass those, a subtle, modest yet efficient strategy, is precisely to use the food motif to celebrate the taste of human diversity. All the playwrights I mentioned here, and many more, use it, but I want to finish on the Compagnie du maladroït and their play *Brothers*, which shows it well.

In the play, the larger context is historical. It is about two French-born brothers who reconstruct the story of their recently deceased grandfather, a refugee Spanish anarchist. On his kitchen table, with the foodstuff they find in his cupboard, they replay his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and his eventual settlement in France. Food is the material with which/by which/ through which this epic is told, where moral and political choices are a question of life or death. Food quite naturally takes upon itself these absolute values: life and death. The grandfather's ethnicity is but alluded to and comes much after his existential choices, which constitute the true foundation of his identity – of any Man's identity, the play suggests. In *Brothers*, the conceptual contents of the play are also informed by the materiality of food objects. Brown sugar cubes stand for the Republicans ("the reds"), white caster sugar for the Francoists. This materiality gives a palpable dimension to the story telling. Notably, it vividly evokes the wear, the crushing, the fragmentation of bodies in the battles or during the exodus. It also allows for a degree of personalisation, sugar cubes representing individuals as defined by their existential choices, caster sugar representing anonymous, conformist crowds. Finally, coffee, whose texture and colour evoke a virgin soil capable of accommodating new roots, will come to materialise the land of exile and of new beginnings. The French-born brothers will subtly pass on the succulence of their mixed identity at the end of the play, when they make a coffee whose aroma spreads in the auditorium, sweeten it with a brown sugar cube, drink it together and conclude: "Indeed. That does change the taste".

The power of food is such that it facilitates the mental projection of the audience in a play, and diasporic playwrights find there a delicate means to transmit their histories and what these taste like.