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In association with

The Allegory of Political Violence in Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half*

Manizha Sepas

'Every [African] literature is a commitment to a particular political ideology'¹ which serves not to discourse abstract theories, but to challenge the violence of a state that maintains perpetual oppression of its people. African literature forefronts struggle against power and against forgetting. It is literature that 'necessitates not forgetting but articulating the past'² as an act of resistance against the justification of oppression. Such a sentiment resonates with those that have suffered oppression as they share a common need to communicate what the 'body remembers'.³ When Sony Labou Tansi claims that 'I write so that fear may possess me',⁴ he is referring to the impossibility and unwillingness to forget the gruesome past, which offers a challenge and protest to legacies of systematised violence.

Sony's *Life and A Half* offers an intimate, human interpretation of processes which have often only been abstracted into theory – as imperialism, neo- and post-colonialism, and globalisation. These processes continue to inflict terror across the globe in Europe's pursuit of 'opulence'.⁵ By employing the language of the grotesque, Sony is able to answer Frantz Fanon's call to '[l]eave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them... in all corners of the globe'.⁶ Sony takes what has been understood only as fact and explores the full, complex and embodied truth. *Life and A Half* relates a violent history that has been committed onto the black body and brings this history, which has only become dissociated and made into abstraction through discourse, back to a level that we can *feel*. Though gruesome from the very beginning (when the Providential Guide kills Martial without interrupting his meal), the story that Sony so graphically depicts is no more violent than what the white humans have already done, and continue to do, to black bodies. Admittedly, the narrative is 'grotesque',⁷ a genre that Sony himself identifies with his novel, and it is in this vein that I wish to study the novel as a 'dare to send the whole world back to hope, and since hope can provoke meat to leap',⁸ the novel serves to critique, to challenge and to empower the colonised who 'find [their] freedom in and through violence'.⁹

The use of language to depict the feeling of fear that goes along with having known struggle serves as a 'collective memory bank'.¹⁰ This 'bank' acts as a direct protest to colonialism, especially when

¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1981), quoted in M. S. C. Okolo, *African Literature as Political Philosophy* (London: Zed books, 2007), p. 101.

² Avadhesh Kumar Singh, 'Theorising/Narrating Resistance and Colonisation in India', in *Discourse of Resistance in the Colonial Period*, ed. by Avadhesh Kumar Singh (Delhi: Creative Books, 2005), 11–72 (p. 12).

³ Sony Labou Tansi, *Life and A Half: A Novel*, trans. by Alison Dundy, Global African Voices (Bloomington, Ind., and Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 115, 118, 119, 120, and 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, NY: Grove Books, 1963), p. 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁷ Sony, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹ Fanon, p. 68.

¹⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), p. 16.

considering that the ‘most important area of domination [for colonialism] was the mental universe’.¹¹ Sony is not writing for the understanding of *all* people the world-over. He is writing because the oppression that he *feels* in his own flesh and blood must be communicated for it to remain alive and for it to have meaning. If he were to speak these words, he would know that his words will only be misconstrued, misunderstood, misquoted and abused – as mine have been when speaking of my suffering as interwoven with the rape and annihilation of my nation. If he were to write it plainly in the language of his oppressors, for them to understand, his words would be explored theoretically until they have lost their potency, and subsequently their effect. The intellectual obsession with ‘theoriz[ing] the practice of life without daring to practice it’,¹² which takes the *life* out of the practice, has happened historically: it happens when white academics quote Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Achille Mbembe and Kwame Nkrumah, among countless others, but fail to understand that their words come with *feelings* inextricably tied to the practice of the words, which view ‘tomorrow through today’s eyes’.¹³ Yet, even if Sony were to speak patiently and plainly in the language of his oppressors, they would not understand ‘because they (as “Europeans,” caught in the snare of an exhausted self-nostalgic metaphor) are assimilating what they read back into that snare and into what they already know’.¹⁴

Sony writes from *feeling*, not for white audience, but for his own people and, in using a style of the grotesque, he knows that he will be excluding the white theorist who can watch but who cannot sit at the table and join in on the joke. His writing might also serve to make white readers, who have relegated violence to the distant lands of the other, uncomfortable. Given this, it makes sense that he will write in the language that ‘raped’ him, his people and his nation, not to show his mastery over it but to communicate the ‘absurdity of the absurd’¹⁵ which relies on black humour. This is the ‘revenge’ about which Fanon speaks,

The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the way of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him.¹⁶

Sony will know that the oppressed who feel the pain of oppression will not miss the joke. His is a carnivalesque language that is neither surreal in the western understanding of it, nor magical realist as a space allowed by white theorists for black writers to explore their kinkiness. The closest genre that comes to defining Sony’s novel, beside the grotesque, is Afro-futurism because he writes the future with careful consideration to the past – both of which severely affect the present. The future either gives hope or eradicates the possibility of it; and, the past becomes a platform for the ‘tragedy’ of violence that has ‘reduced’ the mass to violence with ‘an absolute absence of response’ to the ‘absolute exercise of legitimized violence from the colonizers’.¹⁷ ‘It was tragic’, writes Sony, that ‘people died a raw death right in front of others who watched them patiently’.¹⁸

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sony, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, ‘Fuck You, Žižek!’, *Zedbooks*, 26 July 2016 <<https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/fuck-you-zizek/>> [accessed 19 April 2019].

¹⁵ Sony, p. 3.

¹⁶ Fanon, p. 33.

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Preface to Concerning Violence: Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialistic Self-Defence’, *Film Quarterly*, 68.1 (2014), 61–2 (p. 62) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2014.68.1.61>>.

¹⁸ Sony, p. 62.

Afro-futurism, then, is a literary genre that does not stop short of being a ‘realistic medium of racial protest’,¹⁹ but which aims to advocate the possibility of imagining alternative futures that ‘look backward *and* forward’ at once.²⁰ The importance of looking backward in order to instil traditional values on to the collective consciousness also comes with the need to remember the violence imposed upon black bodies by the white system of unsatiated power. Sony’s novel, therefore, begins with the death of Martial who will not be got rid of, claiming, ‘I will not die this death’,²¹ and ends with the profound message that ‘my body remembers you’,²² the white harbinger of violence who has:

deliberately arrested [the African] culture at the tribal stage to perpetuate the myth that African people were near cannibals, had no real ambitions in life, and were preoccupied with sex and drink. In fact, the wide-spread vice often found in the African townships is a result of the interference of the White man in the natural evolution of the true native culture.²³

Afrofuturism, therefore, ‘draws on the past in order to interrogate and critique’²⁴ the colonial horrors that were caused by the preoccupation with ‘who should suck which pieces of Africa’²⁵ while viewing the black body as nothing more than a commodity to be exploited for cheap labour and as objects of a fetish for lovers of the exotic. In the novel, time moves on, dictators change but their actions remain as before, and they continue to be ‘supplied by the foreign powers’,²⁶ making a direct criticism of the postcolonial nation-state. Meanwhile, Martial continues to linger, appearing before the Guide as a reminder of his ‘senseless rule’²⁷ and a reminder to the reader that ‘[w]e must overcome the death of life because that is more heinous than the death of beings’.²⁸ Chaidana, the mother, also exists in memory, sentiment and even in name shared by her daughter who declares, ‘[i]f I don’t speak, I die slowly from the inside. I’ll die all the way to the surface; nothing will be left of me but peelings, the envelope. When I speak, I define myself’.²⁹ This invokes the need to remember and the need to overcome continued oppression, and subsequently, to exist on one’s own terms. The analogy of ‘nothing... but peelings’ echoes Fanon’s concept of ‘affranchised slaves’,³⁰ the colonised who attempt upward mobility by appropriating the coloniser’s culture; for Fanon, they wear a white mask but their skin remains black.³¹

Fanon described how the violence of colonialism affects the oppressed; it alters even their dreams, which always feature ‘muscular prowess’³² despite the oppression of the body. Sony arrives at

¹⁹ Madhu Dubey, ‘The Future of Race in Afro-Futurist Fiction’, in *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, ed. by Julie E. Moody-Freeman and Sandra Jackson (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 15–31 (p. 16).

²⁰ Alondra Nelson, ‘Introduction: Future Texts’, *Social Texts*, 20.2 (2002), 1–15 (p. 3), quoted in Dubey, p. 21.

²¹ Sony, p. 6.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²³ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings* (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1978), p. 70.

²⁴ Julie E. Moody-Freeman and Sandra Jackson, ‘Introduction: The Black Imagination and the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative’, in *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, ed. by Julie E. Moody-Freeman and Sandra Jackson (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing: 2011), 1–14 (p. 3).

²⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972), p. 140.

²⁶ Sony, p. 43.

²⁷ Flora Veit-Wild, ‘The Grotesque Body of the Postcolony: Sony Labou Tansi and Dambudzo Marechera’, *Revue de littérature comparée*, 314 (2005), 227–239 (p. 238) <<https://doi.org/10.3917/rlc.314.0227>>.

²⁸ Sony, p. 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁰ Fanon, p. 47.

³¹ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967).

³² *Ibid.*, 40.

the scene many years later having understood the face of revolt of a few men ‘anxiously’ seeking out the firearms technology that was ‘easily obtainable from Europeans’³³ to defend themselves against the high-tech violent machination of the European oppressor. He understood that ‘fighting each other to get rid of war’ made the brute force of a nation ‘hooked on war’.³⁴ It is a logic-defying phenomenon that can only be explained through the absurd. Therefore, his ‘anticolonial rhetoric’³⁵ is not an endorsement of violence; it is ostensibly a dramatization of the ‘legitimized violence’ of the colonisers and the reality that ‘[w]herever colonisation is a fact, the indigenous culture begins to rot and among the ruins something begins to be born which is condemned to exist on the margin allowed it by the European culture’.³⁶ a margin fraught with violence.

Sony’s use of the language of the grotesque is fitting for showing a reality that is neither romanticising a past nor pacifying the people’s continued will to resist. Thus, he speaks words that resonate truth to hearts that beat to the drums of rage against the ‘fat, lecherous, imbecile’³⁷ white man and his all-devouring greed: the white man and his white vision which leaves no hope for a future, and which sacrificed peaceful coexistence for the comfort and development of the European metropolis that has become metonym for progress. That too at the cost of the underdevelopment of the colonies, ‘built up’, as Europe is, by the ‘sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians’ and other colonised peoples.³⁸

The most gruesome act in the novel is unmistakably the act of cannibalism which is a theatricalisation that ‘transgresses likeness to real through hyperbolic overdrawing’.³⁹ In other words, the author, who comes from the Congo where exploitation of bodies and land continues, makes a direct reference to the inseparable link between colonialism and the environment, the abuse of which has left a grim future where humankind faces its own extinction. Further, it makes a direct link to the cannibalistic nature of the exploitative human being for whom consumption far outweighs justice and rationality. By the ‘supply of the foreign powers’, such as that of the Belgian King Leopold II, people were dismembered, raped, killed and even consumed by an army who served the ‘foreign powers’. It was the ‘foreign powers’ who ‘showered with weapons’⁴⁰ the army of the Providential Guides, creating them in their own image as ‘drunk [upon] flesh and blood’.⁴¹ Through the intervention of the ‘foreign powers’, the land has been relegated to ‘the land of bodies and blood’⁴² where ‘blood, brains, and other human products destined for the foreign power that secretly supplied the Guides were secretly sold’.⁴³

However, Sony goes further yet because he also brings into focus the gendered nature of violence: that ‘[c]olonizer and colonized are united in the violence of gendering’,⁴⁴ which is embodied through the figures of Chaidana, both the mother and the daughter; it is as if the gendered nature of violence continues unphased generation to generation. Chaidana, daughter of Martial, dreams of nothing but murdering the Providential Guide even as her body lies limp in his bed every night. When the doctor

³³ Rodney, p. 118.

³⁴ Sony, p. 129.

³⁵ Veit-Wild, p. 237.

³⁶ Biko, p. 70.

³⁷ Veit-Wild, p. 228.

³⁸ Fanon, p. 76.

³⁹ Veit-Wild, p. 234.

⁴⁰ Sony, p. 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁴ Spivak, p. 62.

finds a way for her to leave the Guide's palace, she says, 'I'm not leaving here until I've killed him at least twenty times. He will have to crawl and beg for my mercy. I'll stomp all over him'.⁴⁵ She dreams of having Fanonian 'prowess' and taking revenge on him for murdering her father and feeding his body to the remaining members of their 'rag'⁴⁶ family. Here the term 'rag' connotes material poverty and its symptomatic denial of values, as if consumption is the only measure for growth, and materiality the only means of power. She bemoans having 'life and a half inside me'⁴⁷ and denounces her body as 'a traitor',⁴⁸ a 'wicked sum',⁴⁹ an 'ugly battle, an ugly brawl',⁵⁰ and 'a dirty parenthesis'.⁵¹ She refers to 'her heinous father'⁵² who raped and impregnated her with a child deformed of spirit – which brings to mind the 'rot[ting]' of indigenous culture by colonisation⁵³ and the globalised modern postcolonial offspring.

Chaidana, the daughter, then turns to her body, claiming that 'I'll conquer the city with my sex, like Mama did. It's written in my blood',⁵⁴ as if no other option remained to her who is born a woman in the violent world of man and his quest for power. This is testimony to the power of memory but also to the cannibalistic nature of exploitation for capital. Whereas she sees her body as a tool through which to 'conquer the city' and to 'win' the 'war' that her grandfather and mother lost,⁵⁵ her body, like that of her mother, is seen as 'sensual, brutal'⁵⁶ and denounced as 'that savage female dressed like the Virgin'.⁵⁷ Even the term 'beautiful'⁵⁸ attached to her body (as uttered by Monsieur l'Abbé) has echoes of perversion and fetishization, to which she responds,

The most painful. The dirtiest. It's the most painful, the dirtiest. And it's with this body that I'll take the city. You have to work with the means that bastardy has left in your hands.⁵⁹

With Chaidana the mother, the lusted-after exotic body became a 'delicious'⁶⁰ temptation with the 'shape of a carnivore'⁶¹ that must itself be conquered and consumed, which is suggestive of cannibalism, especially in the postcolonial states where the black bodies of power sought to assert their violence of politics over the female body. In this manner, 'Sony links power relations in political discourse to violence in gender discourse'⁶² and the novel itself serves as a 'parody [of] the most absurd forms of [colonial and subsequently] postcolonial travesty'.⁶³

⁴⁵ Sony, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵³ Biko, p. 70.

⁵⁴ Sony, p. 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶² Veit-Wild, p. 236.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

The ‘Western capitalist model foisted on African societies via colonialism’,⁶⁴ which created ‘affranchised slaves’, needed the ‘collaboration of African leaders to maintain this status quo’⁶⁵ and so made the leaders ‘into monstrosities’⁶⁶ who for their own self-interest ‘stick [their] hands between the millions’⁶⁷ which they had ‘borrowed’⁶⁸ from the foreign powers. When the global market is ‘primarily concerned with making futures safe for the market’⁶⁹ in a continuation of exploitation that has made Africa ‘the zone of the absolute dystopia’,⁷⁰ then, the job of the writer is to ‘forecast and fix’⁷¹ this image. This can only be done through intervention with the past, through communicating the present with all its shameless horrors, and by projecting a vision of the future that ‘dares... to hope’. Sony’s success is in interrupting the power relations by showing the ugly nature of power and greed that afflicts the postcolonial nation-states which continue to serve the foreign powers who continue to supply them.

⁶⁴ Okolo, p. 119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Preface’ to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, NY: Grove Books, 1963), 7–31 (p. 8).

⁶⁷ Sony, p. 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁶⁹ Kodwo Eshun, ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.2 (2003), 287–302 (p. 291) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021>>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

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