

Toi, Moi, Tituba...

DOROTHÉ MUNYANEZA

A witch gone astray



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‘Moi, Toi, Tituba…’ by Dorothée Munyaneza undeniably carries significant socio-political weight, as it explores the critical and radical potential of creatively reimagining and embodying the silenced sufferings of Black counter-history, often excluded from dominant, hegemonic discourses. The piece re-tells the story of Tituba, a woman accused of witchcraft in 1692 Salem, targeted because of her social markers, gender, and race. Precisely her absence from historical archives—as a paradigmatic example—triggered the motivation for this creation. However, the piece sometimes falls short in its execution and movement vocabulary, seemingly failing to effectively convey its urgent message of political resistance. After all, as Brecht already knew, a political artwork depends on a good balance between the content and the form.

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Inspired by Maryse Condé’s 1986 book ‘I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem’ and reinterpreted by philosopher Elsa Dorlin in her 2022 article ‘Moi, toi, nous… : Tituba ou l’ontologie de la trace’, Munyaneza’s work aligns with both of these influential sources. It also resonates with the work of another key figure in post-colonial studies, Saidiya Hartman, particularly her concept of ‘critical fabulation’ which is a speculative narrative technique that blends documentary poetics to explore ‘the radical thought of everyday life’ and to construct ‘alternative narratives of Black existence’. Transposing this conceptual framework into a dance performance, Munyaneza seeks to answer the over-arching question of how to express the collective memory of a brutal slave history, embedded in the skin, colour, and movements of new generations. Her answer takes the form of a

virtual-imaginative-summoning ritual—a cry to Tituba that manifests as a proud, defiant gaze, locking eyes with the (majority white) spectators of Les Brigittines' venue.

As the performance begins, the music sets the tone with its electronic and gothic undertones. Khyam Allami's score is unsettling, almost ghostly, complementing Munyaneza's movements that oscillate between smooth, flowy and angular, crampy. Her initial pose—a yoga-like stretch—transitions into more rigid, angular motions, as if her body is battling some unseen force. She wears a long black dress, transparent and fluffy; she is barefoot. Her arms slice through the air, stretching outward before sweeping back in a flat motion. The repetition of these movements through the space, along with her pointed gaze and sharp turns, are confident, focused as if she is aiming at something in the distance.

Many fluorescent tubes and two microphones are carefully arranged as small columns around the space. These props are not mere decoration but become integral to the performance, and Munyaneza's expression and communication with Tituba. The audience, seated on three sides of the stage, becomes part of this visual tableau, adding to the feeling of being encircled by the unfolding drama.

Reconstructing the past in the present to project a different future.

As the narrative progresses, the performance becomes enigmatic. Munyaneza's interaction with the neon poles, her crawling on the floor, and the disjointed, almost possessed movements suggests a ritualistic environment. She sings in her mother tongue, while the voice that emerges from the speakers asks, 'Do you remember' and later, 'Do you know their names?', adding to the spectral quality of the piece. The sounds and vibrations she produces, seem to resonate with something primal, an echo of past pain and injustice.

At this point, I am still fully engaged with the piece, it makes me wonder about the identities being invoked and the histories being confronted. The realization that this might be a summoning, or a re-enactment of past traumas introduces a biopolitical dimension, where the body becomes a site of historical memory and resistance. Munyaneza's embodies a state of seizure: her arms pointing behind her, as if she is pulled by someone, as if she is no longer in control. She throws herself backward, reminiscent of a classical hysterical *topos* 'arc de cercle', but also the similarity of the suppression of lives that differ, the racialized and institutionalized bodies hidden in the shadows of history.

After the singing act she carefully lowers the poles. Now on the floor, she lays down with the tubes, touching them and making sculptural constructions. Here, the red thread of the first section seems to disappear. Are these objects barriers to the past as well? As if history spoke through the cracks and crannies of silent materiality. Later, again, she sings, this time not alone but in a chorus of invisible Titubas coming from the speakers from around the room. The chants and echoes repeating 'ti-ti-ti-ti' insistently fill the room to create a powerful, almost overwhelming atmosphere, though the communication between the performer and the voices seems lacking, as if the voices are talking only between themselves, not in connection to the movements on the stage. The feeling that I was witnessing a solipsistic performance sticks to me and is emphasized throughout the second part.

Munyaneza drapes herself in white cloth, transforming symbolically into a shadowy figure. She brings a purple tube (the only one in this colour) and sits by its side. The connection to Saidyia Hartman's work on slavery and critical fabulation are now made explicit, as the performance shifts from a personal embodiment to a series of statements on the collective memory of the Middle Passage. As individual suffering is intertwined with historical oppression, we listen to the imperative: 'Communiquer avec l'invisible,' 'Écouter les spectres,' 'Tituba', 'Pas une enquête de l'origine mais de la réalité,' 'Vengeance épistémique,' 'Contre page blanche et mot tue,' 'Hommage à Isabelle,' 'Moi, Toi, Nous, Isabelle...'. However, this penultimate section of the piece paints what preceded it in a somewhat dubious light. It almost feels like an unnecessary self-explanatory digression on what has already been explored through other means.

The performance ends with a sense of unresolved tension, with her final dancing act. Unfortunately, the pacing here drags, leaving you wondering if it really ended five minutes ago when it felt like it should have. However, for all its varied quality, this dance performance is an experience that stays with you—whether you want to or not. In the end, its profoundly important political matter outmatches the final product. It reminds us that to crave for a change for the present and the future life conditions it is necessary to disrupt and deconstruct the past as conceived by the colonizer. Reconstructing the past in the present to project a different future.