FRIEDA EKOTTO

DON’T WHISPER TOO MUCH

Translated by CORINE TACHTIRIS
The publication of this translation brings the English-speaking world two path-breaking works by Frieda Ekotto—the novel *Chuchote pas trop* (*Don’t Whisper Too Much*) and the short story collection *Portrait d’une jeune artiste de Bona Mbella* (*Portrait of a Young Artiste from Bona Mbella*).

*Don’t Whisper Too Much* takes place in a Fulani village in Northern Cameroon and revolves around three generations of mothers and daughters who break taboos by intimately loving other women. The main love story involves Ada, an orphan who seeks to know the story of her mother, and Siliki, an older disabled woman who has chosen to live on the village outskirts. All seven stories in *Portrait of a Young Artiste from Bona Mbella* take place in Bona Mbella, a neighborhood of Cameroon’s largest city Douala, and most feature the young lesbian Chantou. Stylistically, the two works are quite different. *Whisper* reads like a haunting prose poem with ambiguous speakers, flashbacks, and fragmented journal excerpts. *Portrait*, much in the style of Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Quartier Mozart* (a film adored by Chantou) and Patrice Nganang’s *Dog Days*, makes use of urban Cameroonian dialogue, gossip, and irreverent humor. But what both works
have in common is the compulsion to “open the breach onto new stories” (*Portrait*), to make space for voices who have gone unheard, and to bring to the center the marginalized stories of women who love women.

At the heart of Ekotto’s writing, which impressively ranges from fiction to scholarship to activism and often artfully blurs the lines between all three, lies a preoccupation with the related themes of confinement and of silence. In an interview with Beti Ellerson, Ekotto says, “Despite leaving the continent and becoming a scholar and professor, I too have felt confined. I have wanted to spill out, but I could not because I felt tied up everywhere. The first challenge I have encountered is language and its poetics as limits of representation when it comes to human experience.” Born in the town of Yaoundé, Cameroon, Ekotto spent her young adult years in Switzerland before moving to the United States for university. Despite being in a relatively privileged position, however, it is not always easy to write as an African lesbian or about African lesbians. The imprecisions and impossibilities of language—including those that make the term “lesbian” difficult to apply to many African women who love women—mean that identity often evades easy representation and that the profundity and complexity of human experience often remain enigmatic. But what is also implicit here is that language is tied to power, and the inability to speak (or what Ekotto calls being “tied up”) is, as Gayatri Spivak argues, an inability to be heard within hegemonic discourse.¹

For Ekotto, then, confinement has to do with one’s relation to systems of power. As she explains to Naminata Diabate, “Confinement is a serious issue for me—and it is not
just the confinement of being behind closed doors or in prisons or whatever. What I call confinement is the impossibility of feeling free, of being able to participate in the world without feeling constrained by one’s race, one’s gender, one’s sexual orientation etc. In a sense you’re never free to do what you want because of all the outside forces that control you and control everything else.” Writing, then, allows Ekotto to carve out spaces within this confinement to “pierce the imperceptible layer of the unsayable and slide through the cracks” (00). Though it was difficult to find a publisher willing to publish the subversive Don’t Whisper Too Much, Ekotto persisted for ten years until the novel was eventually picked up in 2001 by Editions A3, a small publishing house in France, and then reprinted in 2005 by L’Harmattan, who also later published Portrait in 2010. Thus, even the publication history bears the traces of confinement and the difficulty of breaking through power structures.

As an activist, Ekotto speaks out against the silence imposed upon LGBTI people in sub-Saharan Africa where, in many countries, homosexuality has been increasingly criminalized and violence against LGBTI individuals has been on the rise. As perhaps the first openly lesbian Francophone African fiction writer and a unique voice in the Cameroonian intellectual community, Ekotto writes for and in solidarity with her gay family members, LGBTI activists across the continent, and gay compatriots who have lost their lives because of who they have loved. And yet in her fiction, especially in Don’t Whisper Too Much, silence takes on a more dialectical role. Silence is indeed tied to confinement, enclosure, and erasure, but it can also be a form of resistance and solidarity. For instance, when Ada first encounters Affi, the
daughter of her lover Siliki who is literally confined in a boui-boui with other girls awaiting their wedding days, Ekotto writes: “Silence unites them, a silence that reaches the bottom of every chasm, the abyss of bitter anguish. Fear was fortifying their internal energies. Speech was emanating from silence. Doesn’t muteness remain a useful form of resistance, even if it’s humiliating?” (oo). Later in the novel, this spirit of silence is echoed in the story Siliki tells about her wedding night. Siliki tells Ada that despite the fact that the village gossips were listening in, she refused to make a sound on that first night of unwanted consummation: “Juicy gossip was limited, and no one could believe this drama: the defeat that my husband had just suffered. . . . The music of bodies was muffled in the silence of that night veiled by violence. The absence of crude moans represents a failure of the man’s virility” (oo). Though silence is also undone with the very act of Siliki’s narration and with the insistence on the women in the novel writing and reading each other’s stories, Ekotto reminds us that “with Siliki, silence signifies the grandeur of her spirit” (oo). In other words, Don’t Whisper Too Much emphasizes the fact that the voices that are lost or muffled are just as elegant and powerful as those that are retained.

Moreover, Ekotto’s fiction often enacts its own silence by refusing to be immediately accessible and knowable. As Diabate writes of the novel, “Ekotto’s style resists the facile consumption, digestion, and possible disposability of her narrative, thereby establishing the relationship between writing, sexuality, and resistance. The difficulty of telling who is speaking in the novel through the use of multiple and often undistinguished speakerly and writerly voices [as well as] the
multiple ellipses and unfinished sentences . . . seem to reveal that the subversion of sexual norms is encoded through the subversion of textual norms.” And even in the more colloquial prose of Portrait of a Young Artiste from Bona Mbella, there seems to be a connection between sexual transgression and the complex interplay between the spoken and unspoken. For instance, Chantou recounts the story of her childhood friend Munyengue Kongossa (kongossa literally means gossip) who returns to Bona Mbella from abroad with a blond Mohawk, a visible sign of her queerness. She roams the neighborhood (referred to in the stories as “the quat,” which is short for the French quartier), but “no one wants to talk to her because, as they say, you should think everything that you say but not say everything that you think” (00). But the gossiper Munyengue Kongossa is far from being silenced, and the title of the story, “The Revenant,” (which means both ghost and the one who returns) implies that like other ghosts Munyengue Kongossa, discernibly and unabashedly queer, returns to make visible that which has been repressed. Left with few other options, Munyengue Kongossa eventually finds other forms of speech: she belches herself into existence.

In both Whisper and Portrait, voices insist on being heard, but often in cacophonous or indistinguishable ways. Speaking, in other words, does not seem to be the remedy for silence; it does not immediately get one out of the bind of confinement. Rather, speech and silence seem to be permanently intertwined: both can convey meaning, both can convey confusion, and both can be either tools of oppression or tools of resistance. As Ekotto says, “In the flow of chuchotements, (whisperings) there are too many voices. . . . Whatever
voice you can catch is the one you follow.” Ekotto’s writing therefore reflects the fragmentation and chaos of subjects who, like herself, want to spill out but feel tied up everywhere. This is perhaps why imagination is so important in both texts. In Don’t Whisper Too Much Ekotto writes of Siliki and Affi, “Not a day goes by without mother and daughter journeying to far-flung lands where entire islands open up to greet them. Only imagination guarantees such transcendence. Only it provides ways to live the contradiction of consenting to another form of presence” (00). In the short story “The Movie Screen” Chantou’s friend Miss Bami turns her home into an imaginary cinema where the children of the neighborhood play and act out their favorite films. At the end of the story, Miss Bami says, “Imagination, my dear, imagination is learning to create when you lack the means!” (00). What Ekotto’s fiction provides, then, is the site for imagination, for prying open the universe of the possible, and for allowing the chaotic whisperings to flow more freely.

NOTES

Ekotto told me that she herself identifies as a Cameroonian lesbian and thinks of her novels and short stories as “queer.”


3. See both her interviews with Diabate and Ellerson for a discussion of her writing for family members struggling to come out (see n1 above). Ekotto has also spoken publicly about the death of her gay cousin in Cameroon and has written poignantly about figures such as Roger Jean-Claude Mbede, a gay man left to die after he was imprisoned in Cameroon for sending a love message to another man (“Why Do We Always Say Nothing?” paper delivered at the Modern Language Association Convention, Boston, MA, January 2013).


5. As Avery F. Gordon writes of the ghost, “What is distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes obliquely” (Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, 2nd ed. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008], xvi).