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The Transformative Potential of Imoinda: An Interview with Joan Anim-Addo

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The Transformative Potential of *Imoinda*: An Interview with Joan Anim-Addo

by
Lisa Marchi

Lisa Marchi: In her article included in this volume, Giovanna Covi underlines the transformative potential of *Imoinda*, emphasizing in particular the force and impact that the form of the text--an opera *libretto*--exerted on her. Your use of a dominant European cultural form to express the traumatic experience of a "minority" in Europe is indeed unusual and subversive, for you creolize opera with an African-Caribbean content and, in doing so, implicate Western and African-Caribbean readers alike in the narration. This reflection, highlighting the potential of opera and more in general of performance to interpellate readers, leads me to the following question: Has your relation to *Imoinda* changed after you saw your work performed?

Joan Anim Addo: First of all, I think it should be made clear that I have seen *Imoinda* performed several times. The first was a rehearsed reading in 1998. This was part of my agreement with Talawa Theatre with whom I had had a bursary to develop the libretto. I recall the interview with Yvonne Brewster, then director of Talawa Theatre, prior to being told of the women writer's bursary that Talawa would award me. I remember it well, because when she asked what I might be interested to write if I had complete freedom as well as support to develop whatever project I wanted, I said that actually, I wanted to write a libretto. I fully expected her to laugh. She didn't. Instead, she treated my proposal as if it was not only interesting but a welcome and feasible possibility. This was puzzling to me because the writing of a libretto seemed, at the time, to be a project that was culturally off-limits. In the UK, opera signifies cultural specificity related to race and class--specifically the white middle class. I offer all of this to suggest that, in speaking about *Imoinda* as a libretto, I had revealed a project that was--until I spoke about it--a secret to myself and one to which I related somewhat uneasily. So, seeing *Imoinda*, hearing it off the page at the Oval House in London--at the reading--was magic. At the same time, and most importantly, I needed to sharpen my writerly sense of the project, by watching and listening critically. Specifically, I needed more clarity about what I wanted for the sound world of *Imoinda*. In conversation with the director responsible for the reading, I recall that he mentioned Gospel but I knew that that was not what I wanted, because the next performance--at the Horniman

Museum a year later—was wonderful for its community setting. That, too helped me to further clarify what I needed to write into the sound-world of the text. In 2008, with the second published edition of *Imoinda*, the composer, Glenn McClure, led the School of the Arts (SOTA) production in Rochester, New York.

LM: Did the performance push you to introduce any changes in the passage between the first and the second edition?

JAA: What prompted the second edition was being contacted by Glenn McClure and listening to his ideas for working with young people to develop a world premiere. It seemed clear that a portable text was urgently needed, one that young people could physically carry around with them. The first bilingual edition, published in Italy in 2003, was a scholarly edition including several essays. Although extremely important, it was not pocket sized. The second edition of *Imoinda*, in English only, was published in 2008, the year of the world premiere at the School of the Arts (SOTA), in New York.

This performance was of course a world premiere and as such, it was a major event. Most importantly for me, though, was the appreciation of *Imoinda* as an arts project driven by someone else's interest and passion; I didn't know the composer before he contacted me to express his interest. I think now of that production as his project and I fondly recall arriving at SOTA to find—and this was thrilling—theatre as I love it best of all. It was an amazingly collaborative experience. As I understand it, Glenn composed the music in collaboration with Alan Tirré, while the young people worked collaboratively with their teachers on every aspect of the production: stagecraft, costume, music, dance and so on.^[1] I was deeply moved by it all, the more so because we had some very insightful discussion afterwards. It was different again to watch "The Crossing," staged at the Actors' Church, Covent Garden in December, 2014. "The Crossing," a choral piece composed by Odaline de la Martinez (Chachi) represents another version of *Imoinda* and comes out of a lengthy collaboration dating back to a Millennium award, after which I approached Chachi to write the music for my opera. For practical reasons, we have since agreed on *Imoinda* being staged as a Slavery Trilogy. "The Crossing" is Part Two of this Trilogy and was premiered at Tulane University. Sadly, I wasn't able to see the Tulane production but I was certainly there at Covent Garden. I think Charlotte Woodley's review for *Fringe Opera* vividly captures the performance.^[2] I'd highlight what she refers to as "the circular choir, encircling the orchestra, making the audience feel trapped and claustrophobic just like the slaves were." This element of the performance was stunning. But also, it was totally different from the SOTA performance in terms of scale and staging. On the one hand, we had small contained hand movements as dramatic strategy, and on the other we had capoeira-style dance on stage. I love the versioning of *Imoinda* that is emerging. The transformations are so rich and the blossoming of different versions on stage is very Caribbean!

LM: Indeed, you deploy numerous strategies that bring the reader—including a non-Caribbean reader—close to the concrete reality of the Caribbean and the lived experience of the character Imoinda. In his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), Edward Said praises *closeness* (26) as a fundamental step towards the elaboration of a critical consciousness. Which audience did you have in mind when you were writing *Imoinda*?

JAA: While my ideal audience was in all probability a Caribbean one, I've certainly always been aware of this text as diasporic. I was writing *Imoinda* in London, hoping that it would travel to the Caribbean sooner rather than later and constructing it also in terms of the possibilities of Caribbean theatre, that

is, with a sense of differing theatre spaces. Other than that, I was writing the sort of theatre I wanted to see and I am here in the diaspora. Importantly, the I here is one who is a critical or a thinking participant in the theatrical experience. That is to say, as a theatre-goer, I do not take a seat simply to be entertained.

LM: Clearly for you then theater is much more than entertainment. I would like you to comment on the affective potential of an opera like *Imoinda* in particular with reference to music. Nina Eidsheim (2013) describes singing and playing, and therefore music and sound more in general, as “vibrational practices” capable of physically touching and emotionally affecting the listener. Drawing from this interpretation, to what extent is the relation between music and affects a fundamental aspect of your work? To what degree was your decision to write an opera libretto influenced by the desire to expose the public to an aesthetic and more importantly an ethic and affective experience?

JAA: The relation between music and affects is fundamental to opera, I believe, and certainly to *Imoinda*. This is why I’ve mentioned the sound world several times. Specifically, I was aware throughout the writing of *Imoinda* of the contrast between what the enslaved Africans were forced to leave behind—their “vibrational practices,” in Eidsheim’s terms—and what they would attempt to recover in the new place of the Americas without either familiar instruments or leisure. I sought, of course, to discover and reveal some truths of that situation and I was deeply interested in the problem-solving aspect of writing, at the level of music. On board ship, for example, how would the shipmates find solace in familiar “vibrational practices”? It seemed important to me that sound be made only by the body of those captive peoples, and the young people at SOTA did that beautifully. I was very moved. It was also deeply rewarding to watch. About the sound, though, I was clear that I wanted percussion. As you would have noticed, I stipulated drums and again I was aware that I was working against many operatic traditions. That was probably not as alarming to me as it should have been because it was absolutely my writing. I had not been commissioned to do it. Nobody in the world cared whether such a piece of writing ever came into existence. I had the complete luxury of following through on my own concerns with the affective experience. When it was finished, I put it away—as you do—and it was some time later that Giovanna Covi asked me about what I was writing. We got talking about *Imoinda*, she asked to see it and the rest is history. At the same time, in relation to the museum trails that Viv Golding and Maria Lima developed with the Geneseo students at the Pitt Rivers Museum, it should be remembered that they also both have a long history with the text. Viv Golding was involved in the first production of *Imoinda*. It was no coincidence that it was performed at the Horniman Museum where she worked. Similarly, Maria Lima was the person who introduced the text to the composer who would develop the SOTA world premiere.

LM: The idea you expressed previously of publishing *Imoinda* as a portable text is very interesting, as it relates to questions referring to practice, travel, transfer, transformation, and (com)modification, and hence also of pedagogical praxis. In their paper, Maria Lima and Viv Golding illustrate and critically interrogate the collaborative teaching workshop they carried out at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford with *Imoinda*. What emerges from their description is the affective and political force of a creolized text like *Imoinda*, which seems to open up a space for a radical pedagogy. What is your attitude towards museums and how did your perception of the museum change after reading their article?

JAA: I've seen museum practice change over time and I've had a surprising amount of involvement with museums, specifically with Viv Golding who has written about our work together as noted in her essay in this collection. Also the writing that came out of that specific collaboration is published as *Another Doorway: Visible Inside the Museum* (1998). What is key in relation to *Imoinda* is that, as you might expect, both Lima and Golding teach *Imoinda*. It is one creolized text, as you've described it, among many others that their students encounter. In other words, they are used to handling this kind of material with their students. A question that we might ask, though, is this: what needs to happen so that more students can engage with creolized texts in their learning? It is, of course, one of the questions that concerns our research.

LM: To focus further on pedagogy, I recall that in the collective teaching practice described in *Interculturality and Gender* (2009) teaching is presented as travelling rather than reaching a destination. Drawing on your own experience as a teacher and a creative writer, to what extent is this also descriptive of your writing of *Imoinda*? In other words, does the writing of slavery coincide with errantry, with an act of unpredictable travelling that never rests on the found?

JAA: For me, teaching has always been about traveling and the journey itself. As Édouard Glissant articulates it, creolization affords me a special facility, "to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost...and free...in harmony and in errantry" (*Poetics* 34). What's more, much of my life has been unpredictable. Who could possibly have predicted—watching me growing up—that I would become any kind of writer? It was simply not a possibility to be entertained. However, my traveling, has ensured considerable familiarity with what I've called the "(dis)comfort zone." I have inhabited all kinds of culturally foreign spaces—sometimes painfully—and this, as I understand it, is a feature of errantry. The writing of slavery has only become a culturally familiar space because I have allowed it to become so by my persistence. It is a painful space. I have wept and written more times than I care to remember and I really hope to grow out of the need to write about slavery. At the same time, writing *Imoinda* was a necessity—for myself but also for other generations, including my students'—once I discovered that I could undertake such a project.

LM: Among the multiple meanings of travel in *Imoinda*, I also see the travelling from the individual to the collective. As Mina Karavanta argues, there is a clear trajectory "from the individual heroic to the collective act of resistance" (7). It seems to me that your choice to follow this trajectory has historical and ethical reasons: could you please expand on them?

JAA: I lived my formative years in Grenada. I am a person as much of Caribbean sensibilities as any other. By this I mean not only that I am Creole, always already of mixed sensibilities, but with a strong sense of community as source of resistance. My generation was so tuned into the collective that our writing—perhaps Caribbean women's writing especially—has sometimes been considered problematic in this regard. The I is diminished; the we is foregrounded. This collective concern is integral to the story of African-Caribbean survival as *Imoinda* celebrates it.

LM: In relation to creoleness and collectivity, I would like to invite you to reflect upon the concept of hybridity, which in *Imoinda* is visible at multiple levels: cultural, aesthetic, linguistic, social, historical, and theoretical. Would you agree with Karavanta that only a hybrid text can aptly reflect and narrate the complex and intertwined story of *Imoinda* and the history of the Caribbean more in general?

JAA: Hybridity is not a term that I use much in relation to texts from the Caribbean region. I understand creolisation much better. I consider that *Imoinda* tells the story of creolisation that was born of Atlantic slavery. Those of us who are of that heritage are Creoles. There is no purity after creolisation. Our culture is forever syncretic and, in crisscrossing the Atlantic, our culture can appear to be more syncretic. Our cultural artifacts will always be Creole—whether or not they are perceived as such. Of course, the more you travel, the more you become aware of the choices that are available. In other words, there is no other way for me to write if I am trying to explore certain truths about the self. To use Karavanta's terms—and she has certainly been generous in her reading of *Imoinda*—my writing is shaped by many levels of what she terms “hybridity”.

LM: One of the great merits of your work, I think, is the capacity to reverse the downward trajectory from degradation to victimization. *Imoinda*, as you represent her in your *libretto*, is a former princess who is violently uprooted from her homeland, forcefully transplanted to the Caribbean, and then reduced to a slave; yet she is never perceived as a victim. Far from being an oppressed figure with no desires, intentions, and inner force, she is indeed a fierce and resolute woman animated by strong desires, powerful feelings, and the determination to change her destiny and the history of the Caribbean. Could you comment on your general idea of power and resistance, in relation to this interesting aspect of your work, more specifically, on the tension between subjugation and resistance, dispossession and *Imoinda's* resilience, her capacity to re-appropriate her history?

JAA: When you describe *Imoinda* so clearly, one wonders afresh how, as character, she could possibly have been so silenced. I consider that resistance was the key to African survival in the brutal conditions of the Caribbean, whether this was through group rebellion—which was on-going in the region throughout the era of c(h)attle slavery—or through individual and covert acts. Moreover, I have observed that a habit of resistance still continues to prove itself a useful resource. Linked to this, black women have been singularly absent from English literature. This is one of my preoccupations in *Touching the Body* (2007). It is as if, for example, to be described as a slave or a slave woman was all the information that was necessary to know that particular being. For reasons with which we are familiar, we have not had as much writing of the interior lives of the enslaved woman as we wish. For me, then, a certain fascination lies between what *Imoinda* shows to the world and what is going on in her interior world. As I've explored at some length in “Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect” (*Feminist Review* 104, 2013:5-23), this two-sided existence was a source of considerable daily (and nightly) tension between subjugation and resistance.

LM: You mentioned Glissant already in the course of our conversation, and he certainly underlines this tension. Glissant describes the Plantation as a complex “universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, [where] forms of humanity stubbornly persisted” (65). Clearly the Plantation is the historical setting of *Imoinda* and your training as a historian renders it poignantly. Would you comment on the possibility that it also functions as a paradigm to illustrate today's global modes of relation and, more importantly, that it may also denote your position as a resistant ex-centric? Further, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, would you agree that you occupy the position of a “minor” intellectual, that is somebody who speaks from the position of a minority and uses a major language to express political and collective concerns?

JAA: I love Glissant's insistence on seeing the “forms of humanity” that “stubbornly” persist. What does it mean to be human? That is a question that will remain with me always from my reading and

writing of slavery. At the same time, positioned in the metropolis as I am, that paradigm functions as a constant reminder of our global modes of relation and the tensions that persist. It is certainly true that I speak or write to those tensions and I feel privileged indeed to occupy the space of a “resistant ex-centric.” To be truthful, it feels like a badge of honour and if that position also converges with Deleuze and Guattari’s meanings, then I can have no objections. There are other possible ramifications, of course, when we begin to consider notions of the minor intellectual particularly in relation to the writer as artist. For example, the artist as intellectual is not a position that is well documented in western thought, as I know it. If we allow that thought to lead to the black woman artist as intellectual, then we really move into challenging intellectual history. We should leave that one for now.

LM: In *Imoinda*, divergent and often conflicting vocal trajectories overlap: the voice of the female heroine and of the other women who gravitate around her appears to be a crucial instrument of resistance and a means to break the silence, bear witness, promote awareness and a shared knowledge; the voices of the overseer and of Imoinda’s father, on the contrary, are represented as a tool through which men exert their power and therefore ultimately as a means of oppression, humiliation, control. The voice, as we know, is not always a positive medium to break the silence and thus an instrument of emancipation; it may also be an instrument of oppression and power. In your opera, the vocal divide between violence and emancipation is determined by a gender-specific asymmetry. Would you say that this opposite vocal performativity obeys a general norm or is rather determined by the racist context of the story?

JAA: Hopefully we are discovering that the violent and dehumanizing conditions that prevailed were neither determined by gender, nor even by race, after all. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* describes a European world plagued by forms of extreme violence that became normative. The world he describes was also a gendered world. There were similarities with the Africa that I represent, its wars, pillaging and so on. Predominantly, excesses of male violence characterized power relations of the period and not surprisingly, similar forms of brutality were exported to the Caribbean. My character Prince Oko was trained up for battle. But on the question of voice and silence, in this context in which people were silenced—violently so, or as NourbeSe Philip puts it, on pain of having their tongues cut off—to claim a voice would be emancipatory.

LM: In *Imoinda*, you combine realism and imagination to fill in the voids that traverse a silenced and forgotten history like that of the Caribbean. To what extent is imagination in your specific case a fruitful strategy to fill in the gaps of history, deal with absence, and introduce the reader into the life and world of a distant and radical Other? Would you say that imagination in *Imoinda* facilitates recognition, responsibility, and justice? I am phrasing this question with Martha C. Nussbaum in mind, who in *Poetic Justice* (1996), argues that the cultivation of the imagination is “an essential bridge to social justice” (xviii).

JAA: I recall that it was fairly popular when I was growing up to speak of the Caribbean as having no history. Whatever that might have meant, it never rang true for me. It was only when I came to historical research that I began to understand the lack of detailed records that one would have so wished to find in the archive. This is a huge problem for writing a history. As a creative writer, mercifully I have the crucial additional tool that we refer to as the imagination. Kamau Brathwaite—a historian as well as a poet—deftly refers to what the imagination allows us to do in the context of Atlantic slavery as “to leap our discontinuities.” (57) I had not considered Nussbaum’s notion of

“poetic justice” before, but it seems as if I should. It is, after all, a kind of justice that Imoinda’s children tell her story, especially in the metropolitan centres built on the profit of black bodies bought and sold.

LM: Your reference to Imoinda’s children brings to mind consideration about the family in the Caribbean, which has historically been a site of affects but also of tension, loss, and oppression because of the traumatic intrusion into private lives of the public regime of slavery. What do you think are the advantages and pitfalls of using terms such as fraternity and/or sisterhood to imagine affective forms of kinship that go beyond filiation and therefore beyond the strict confines of the family with reference to the Caribbean?

JAA: I’m not sure that I would consider the family in terms of “pitfalls” and “advantages” though the family is surely a mixed blessing when we have one. Can you imagine, however, a situation when you are not allowed to have your own family? Atlantic slavery waged war on the African family. You were property. Your children were not your own; they were the master’s property. Biological brothers and sisters were here today and sold tomorrow. Husbands? Wives? Those women had to create their own support structures or not survive. *Imoinda* is about survival despite all the terrible things that happened. Sisterhood was always already about survival and way beyond the “confines” of the family as it is generally thought of in Europe.

LM: The complexity and richness of a creolized text like *Imoinda* forces me to ask you a double question, which I could summarize as follows: to what extent do you regard literature as imbricated with ethics and with politics? Jacques Derrida binds ethics to an attentiveness to the text that speaks from positions of total otherness, while Jacques Rancière defines as political “a film that displays its distance from the mainstream circulation of words, sounds, images, practices and affects within which it imagines its effect” [“un film qui montre sa distance avec le mode de circulation des paroles, des sons, des images, des gestes et des affects au sein duquel il pense l’effet de ses forms”] (91, my translation). Thus, one praises proximity, the other a distancing movement. Do you consider *Imoinda* a political text in Rancière’s terms? If so, to what extent does your writing distance itself from circulating words, ideas, behaviors, affects about Caribbean and transatlantic slavery history and how? And most importantly, do you see your text as overlapping with and contributing to the sphere of ethics, and if so, in which ways?

JAA: What a double question! Why did I first insist upon writing? Partly because at a specific moment I found myself to be among a privileged minority of African-Caribbean women who could assume such a responsibility, given *that history* and its aftermath. As such, it was in part a political decision. I did not emerge from a middle class cocoon destined to write and to find a privileged place in the world, far from it. So, yes, I consider my writing to be political. *Imoinda* and the women of that text are speaking, thinking subjects in direct contradiction to what has been generally understood about enslaved women. They reflect an important part of what it means to be human. That humanity is not new though it has been newly allowed to speak. I don’t feel that I can elaborate on the ethics of it. Possibly that is for the reader or audience *to do*.

Notes

^[1] For more details on this performance, see <http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/article/20080503/NEWS01/805030324/SOTA-gives-Imoinda-voice-through-opera>

^[2] The full review is available at: <http://www.fringeopera.com/reviews/review-the-crossing-by-odaline-de-la-martinez/>

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