

“Measuring Silences” in the Translation of Awa Thiam's *La Parole aux Négresses*

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In her influential 1978 text *La Parole aux Négresses* (*Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*), Senegalese activist Awa Thiam centers the narratives—“des mots” (15) and “des maux” (71) ‘the voices’ (9) and ‘trials’ (51)—of ethnically diverse African women, challenging conventions within African postcolonial politics and societies. Gertrude Mutonkley Mianda credits Thiam with being “the first African woman to publicly denounce excision, infibulation, and polygamy, and break the silence about this taboo” (8). *La Parole aux Négresses* gained prominence among feminists worldwide such that years before an English translation by Dorothy Blair appeared in 1986, Anglophone feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan were citing her work (Mianda 9).

As Mianda argues, while Thiam’s ethnographically rich and harrowing details of women’s experiences captured the attention of feminist audiences, her theoretical insights, particularly those presaging the concept of intersectionality, have gone unacknowledged (8, 9). This lack of acknowledgment echoes the historic treatment of African scholars not as theorists like their Western counterparts, but as informants, “confined to the gathering of raw information” (Miller 2). Indeed, Thiam seems to anticipate this in *La Parole aux Négresses* when she critiques Western feminists’ prejudgments about gendered practices in Africa as backward, irrational, and uncivilized, crafted without taking the effort “de connaître réellement” (104) ‘to get to know’ (79) the women themselves. Thus, hierarchical (pre)judgment misrecognizes and erases African agency and theory.

As Mianda further argues, the lack of acknowledgment of Thiam’s work as a theoretical intervention is exacerbated by “English language hegemony,” as even French feminists tend to cite Anglophone literature when referring to Black feminism and intersectionality (15). In this paper, I consider a different aspect of English language hegemony, analyzing the ways in which the English translation itself underplays Thiam’s theoretical contributions. Specifically, five forms of silencing¹ or “ideological refusals” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 82) appear in the translation, many of which scholars have linked to receptions and English translations of Black Francophone texts in particular: de-formalization, domestication, de-philosophizing, untracing, and invisibilization. I focus not only on the “negative” aspect of these silences, but also on the restitution of Thiam’s insights from the original French text—namely de-homogenizing Africa,

¹ I use the term “measuring silences” in the title based on Spivak’s discussion in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” on p. 81.

Blackness, and the West; identifying contradictions within the gendered political economy of postcolonial societies; centering coloniality in theorizations of intersectionality; and proposing a radical reflexivity that identifies and problematizes agentic participation in subjugation.

Mapping the “politics of translation” involves noting the translator’s positionality and context (Spivak, *Outside* 201, 202). British scholar Dorothy S. Blair, the translator of Awa Thiam’s *La Parole aux Négresses*, formed a reputation as a “pioneering” expert on African Literature, both by publishing texts on Francophone literature in Africa in 1976 and Senegal specifically in 1984, and also by translating over 20 works from Northern and Western African authors, particularly women (Steemers 154-55, Iloh 116). Notably, these included seminal Senegalese women’s literature by Aminata Sow Fall (*La Grève des Bâttu/The Beggars’ Strike* 1981), Nafissatou Diallo (*De Tilène au Plateau/A Dakar Childhood* 1982), and Mariama Bâ (*Un Chant Écarlate/Scarlet Song* 1985), in addition to Awa Thiam.

Though I am tempted to do so, I cannot attribute particular intentionality to the translator alone. The production of translations occurs within a network of players who themselves are “agents of translation,” including not just the author, translator, and press, but also broader institutions, political influences, and cultural innovators (Milton and Bandia 1, Buzelin 6). In terms of presses, Pluto Press in London published Blair’s translation first in 1986, while Research Associates School Times Publications in Chicago published another edition in 1995 with slight changes in the title: *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Black Women and Oppression in Black Africa*. The latter was the only edition available to me. Thus, in the analysis that follows, when I use phrases such as “the Blair translation” and “Blair translates a certain way,” I’m referring to this broader context or network of agents and the 1995 edition specifically.

My critique comes from my own positionality and partial perspective as a US-born, Anglophone Black feminist anthropologist. I challenge my own complicity in the reproduction of English-language hegemony and silencing of African women authors, as Keisha-Khan Perry in her work on Lélia Gonzalez, a Brazilian Black feminist anthropologist, challenges Black scholars to do. Thus, this serves as an invitation for a re-engagement directly with Thiam’s own words and the words of diverse women whose testimonies Thiam collected.

“De-formalizing” the text

One of the first differences I noticed in reading *La Parole aux Négresses* alongside the translation *Speak Out, Black Sisters* is the omission of many notes, references, and numerical facts. The Blair translation reformatted all but two of Thiam’s footnotes, either by inserting citations and comments within the text or by

simply omitting them. The reformatting seems at first a trivial style revision. However, upon closer observation, the bibliography in the translation omits 19 sources that appear in the original French text. Of those omitted, 13 concern women and/or feminism in a range of places, such as England, France, Latin America, Mozambique, Niger, and the United States. As Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne argue, citation is “performative,” produced around “particular idea[s] of academic authority” (11). Here then, we can trace two performances: Thiam’s inclusion of sources, indicating her authority of critical theory and global feminisms; and the translation’s exclusion of Thiam’s choices, in effect undermining that very authority by presenting a more limited repertoire from which Thiam produced her work.

Several of the footnotes omitted from the translation contain Thiam’s explanations about the specificity of African cultural practices, sometimes accompanied with the phrase “en Afrique noire.” These omissions include discussions of the “*natte*” (24) ‘mat’ (16); “les noces,” (31) celebration of weddings and consummation (22); the family (35; Thiam, Blair 25); the specifying of practices as Wolof or Toucouleur (35; Thiam, Blair 25); and Ousmane Sembène’s film *Xala* (40; Thiam, Blair 28). Following Christopher Miller in his analysis of *La Parole aux Nègresses*, “the phrase ‘in Black Africa,’” accompanied with a “whole anthropological explanation,” functions as a literary device that represents Thiam’s performance not just of “anthropological rhetoric,” but also as an anthropological authority (255).² Thus, the translation’s erasure of notes containing the phrase “en Afrique noire” and anthropological explanations subtracts from Thiam’s assertion of anthropological authority.

Along with footnotes, the translation omits several numerical facts provided by Thiam. On page 91, the translation removes the range of exorbitant costs in marrying multiple women: “qui varient de 50 000, 100 000 à plus de 1 million de francs CFA” (Thiam 124) ‘which vary from 50,000, 100, 000 to more than 1 million CFA francs’ (my translation). Similarly, the translation substitutes ‘nominal sum’ (92) for Thiam’s original statement of a range: “une modique somme allant de 50 à 2 500 francs” ‘a modest sum going from 50 to 2,500 francs’ (my translation) as well as the note explaining the ratio/equivalence of CFA francs to French francs: “50 F CFA : 1 NF” (124). Sums of money exchanged in marriage, along with notes

² Miller argues that the moments readers encounter “in Black Africa” within women’s testimonies evidence “that Thiam’s literacy is projecting itself onto [interviewees’ own] oral performance,” such as that of Yacine, a Malian interviewee (255). Interestingly, however, it is Blair, in the translation, who inserts many of Thiam’s footnotes into the testimonies of the women—including the footnotes in the original text on pages 27, 85, 135, and 136, and their translations on pages 19, 64, 99, and 100 respectively. For example, Thiam places a footnote to Yacine’s testimony on page 27 explaining “Par là, la reconciliation est effective entre les trois parties: le mari, la femme et la belle-famille.” The translation inserts this note as Yacine’s own words on page 19 as the following: ‘It puts the stamp on the reconciliation between the three parties: the husband, the wife, and the in-laws.’

providing the monetary exchange rates, are omitted in the translation on pages 19, 26, and 101 (pp. 27, 36, and 138 in the French text).

Curiously, the translation on pages 77, 82, and 127 also omits Thiam's citation of population statistics, whether in notes or in text (see pp. 102, 108, and 175 in the French text). For example, on page 175, when Thiam uses statistics to explain the stark differences in women's political participation in Guinea versus Algeria, the translation on page 127 provides the ratios of women deputies to total number of deputies (22/72 and 8/261, respectively) but omits Thiam's citing of the difference in total population between Guinea ("4 208 000 habitants" 'residents') and Algeria ("15 772 000 habitants"), which makes the difference even more stark. The translation also omits the note providing the sources for those statistics including the *Annuaire statistique* (*Statistical Yearbook*) published by UNESCO in 1974 and "Emanciper la femme, c'est emanciper la société" 'Emancipating the woman is emancipating society' published in the *Revue du Parti démocratique de Guinée* (*Review of the Democratic Party of Guinea*) in 1975.

If, following Foucault, mathematicization "contribut[es] [...] themes of formalization" (*Birth of the Clinic* 105), then the omission of numbers, references and notes enacts a de-formalization of Thiam's text.³ To be sure, one of the innovative aspects of Thiam's text is its incorporation of multiple genres of writing, the weaving together of ethnography, testimony, theoretical critique, impassioned commentary, and poetry. So, Thiam does disrupt performances of dispassionate scientific writing that would earn the label of a more "formalized" text. However, her reception and translation reveal refusals to engage Thiam's range of formal and informal writing, refusals to recognize her academic authority. Even in French feminist Benoîte Groult's preface to *La Parole*, we see the refusal to take into account Thiam's production of statistics: "L'auteur n'a pas cherché à nous apporter une information scientifique ou statistique. D'autres l'avaient déjà fait" (Thiam ii). 'The author has not tried to bring us scientific information or statistics. Others have already done this' (Thiam, Blair 2). This statement ignores not only the statistics I've described above, but also the detailed medical information Thiam provides about the consequences of excision, infibulation, and whitening creams. Earlier in the preface, Groult provides a clue as to why these can be ignored:

Ce n'est pas en tant qu'écrivain que je voudrais dire quelques mots du livre d'Awa Thiam. Encore moins au nom de ce que nous appelons les valeurs

³ According to Foucault, mathematics formed a model for medicine and sciences by providing "formalization"—"a principle of coherence of a conceptual process that culminates outside itself" (*Birth of the Clinic* 105)—as well as "attain[ing] formal rigour and demonstrativity" (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 189). Arguably, social-scientific discourses appeal to numbers and a kind of arithmetic of notes and references as a means for establishing "rigor" and demonstrating both "social facts" and authority.

de notre civilisation occidentale. Ce n'est pas non plus en tant que féministe. C'est en tant que femme tout simplement. (Thiam i)

I would like to say a few words about Awa Thiam's book, not in my capacity as a writer; even less in the name of what we call the values of our Western civilization. It is not as a feminist either, that I speak; it is quite simply as a woman. (Thiam, Blair 1)

Why not read and respond to the work as a feminist, a writer, and a scholar? In response to Groult's preface, Mianda critiques its "condescension" and "patronizing comments" (12). Through its omissions of notes, references, and statistics, the translation reproduces this condescension, interpellating readers of the English version into not fully engaging with Thiam as writers, feminists, and scholars.

Domesticating and Dephilosophizing

According to Kathryn Batchelor, translations often work to create "easy readability" (*Decolonizing Translation* 77,78) of a text, a practice Lawrence Venuti has called "domesticating" (210). In the translation of *La Parole*, such domestication manifests in the substitution of Anglicized idioms for certain phrases and theoretical terms. For example, when Thiam critiques the suggestion made in many parts of Africa that clitoridectomy symbolizes women's solidarity, she writes "Cet argument apparaît très faible" (108). Although this can be directly translated as 'This argument appears very weak,' in Blair's translation, the sentence reads "This argument does not hold water" (Thiam, Blair 82). In her section addressing women internationally fighting the "même combat" 'same fight,' Thiam speaks of "la violence phallogocentrique" that tries "vous réduire en inférieures" 'to reduce you to an inferior' (168). In the translation, the latter phrase becomes "make you play second fiddle" (Thiam, Blair 124). In another case, Blair's translation substitutes "a certain amount of palm-greasing" (Thiam, Blair 91) for "corruption" in the original text (124). Similar to the erasure of notes, sources, and numbers, these particular substitutions of idioms deformalize Thiam's text. This is particularly the case in the places where Blair replaces theoretical terms such as mystification, demystification, and alienation with idioms.

In her analysis of Farrington's English translation of Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (*Wretched of the Earth*), Batchelor proposes the term "dephilosophization" (21) to describe the "obscur[ing]" (11) and removal of "terminological clues" (10) of intellectual genealogies and theoretical engagements. For example, Batchelor finds that Fanon's use of the Sartrean concepts of *praxis*, *totalisation*, and *projet* "disappears" ("Fanon's *Les Damnés de*

la terre” 11) in the English translation as ‘practice,’ ‘all-inclusive,’ and ‘plan’ (15, 19). These replacements constitute “shifts in meaning,” disrupting the nuance in Fanon’s arguments and leading to misreadings (17).

Similarly, the translation of *La Parole aux Nègresses* obscures elements of Thiam’s engagements with Marxist theorizations of mystification and demystification. For example, in the original text, Thiam claims, “Les Nègro-Africains se sont longtemps complu, se complaisant encore à mystifier les Nègro-Africaines. Il faut que cette campagne mystificatrice cesse” (19). This claim is translated as the following: “For a long time, African men delighted in doing down their womenfolk, and indeed, they still do. This campaign must cease” (12). The replacement of “mystifier” with “doing down” flattens Thiam’s argument. In this section, Thiam rejects male African political leaders’ critiques of feminism as unnecessary in African contexts, where there is supposed equal partnership. For Thiam, this critique fails to account for the real, gendered material inequities in marital relations, education, and political representation. Unlike the phrase “doing down,” Thiam’s use of “mystifier” then echoes the theorization of mystification by Henri Lefebvre and Norbert Gusterman as the process by which ideologies “present themselves as other than they are, with a meaning that does not reflect their truth” (74). Further, for Lefebvre and Gusterman, ideologies “*dress [reality] up in an appearance that is its direct opposite*” (71, italics in original), similar to the way that claims of gender equality hide structures of inequality.

Later in the text, Thiam writes of African women in the wake of independence movements: “Il faudra qu’elle apprenne à démystifier cette dépendance à l’égard de l’homme, cette aliénation qu’elle a jadis vécue ou qu’elle vit encore aujourd’hui” (156). In the translation this becomes, ‘They will have to call men’s bluff and prove their independence; they will have to reject the alienating influences which have cast a shadow over their lives in the past, and still do to this day’ (115). Thiam’s phrase “apprenne à démystifier cette dépendance” ‘learn to demystify this dependence’ characterizes women as revolutionary agents engaged in struggle against multiple oppressions, a struggle necessitating re-education (156). In the translation, however, this phrase becomes “to call men’s bluff and prove their independence” (115), a change which positions women as reactionary, in need of “proving” themselves.

The de-philosophizing of mystification displaces Thiam from debates in postwar and Cold-War-era France, where she attended university and obtained doctorates in anthropology and philosophy and where, according to Michael Kelly, “Mystification was a ubiquitous motif” and “common currency in the political polemics” (79). As Kelly remarks, for critical theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes, mystification and demystification related intimately to Marxist

conceptions of ideology and alienation (86).⁴ However, the translation de-links these concepts with the insertion of “reject the alienating influences” in place of “demystifier [...] cette aliénation.” Elsewhere in the text, the translation further de-philosophizes the concept of alienation.

Throughout *La Parole*, Thiam uses alienation as a multilayered concept, and in many places, Blair directly translates the term—namely, where Thiam discusses alienation as a process opposed to liberation (149, 162, 164; Thiam, Blair 109, 120, 121), a product of a Europeanizing ideology (149; Thiam, Blair 109) or colonizing education (109; Thiam, Blair 82), a historically persistent veiling or mystification (156; Thiam, Blair 115), and a cultural practice of separating women from their own bodies and pleasures (90; Thiam, Blair 68). The places where Blair does not translate *aliénation* directly, but rather as “brainwashing” and “denying herself” occur in the sections concerning Thiam’s critiques of polygamy and skin-whitening.

In terms of polygamy, Thiam calls into question the contradiction in the ways men across classes participate in polygamy to signify wealthy status, but do so despite its unaffordability and the risk of indebtedness (and sometimes criminalization). She asks:

S’agirait-il donc de jeter de la poudre aux yeux d’autrui? De faire illusion? Ou s’agirait-il tout simplement d’aliénation? [...] on pourrait se demander si les hommes polygames ne sont ni plus ni moins que des égoïstes, des inconscients, des irresponsables, des *brainwashed men*.¹ (Note 1: Des aliénés.) (120)

These two questions are translated as the following:

Are they trying to mislead people? Or is it just a question of brainwashing? [...] it seems that the explanation is simply that polygamous men are selfish, irresponsible, thoughtless, *brainwashed*. (89)

Perhaps, the translation of “aliénation” as “brainwashed” follows Thiam’s use of the English phrase “*brainwashed men*,” which she translates in the note as “Des aliénés.” However, in French, “des aliénés” has multiple meanings, referring not just to “the alienated,” but also pejoratively to “the insane,” the latter of which could fit with the preceding series of negative portrayals of polygamous men in the latter quote above. Moreover, Thiam’s contrasting of “illusion” as deception with “aliénation” as self-deception in the former quote aligns with theorizations of

⁴ Kelly writes, “Like ideology more generally, mystification therefore conflicts with the development of a critical knowledge of real social structures, and prevents people from taking effective practical steps to overcome the alienation of their everyday life” (86).

aliénation as an “abstraction” and “false life” within capitalism (Lefebvre and Gusterman 75). The notion of “false life” is reminiscent of Maryse Condé’s definition of an alienated person as “someone who is trying to be what he can’t be because he does not like what he is” (60). These notions fit with Thiam’s discussion of the practice of polygamy among the urban working class, for whom Thiam asserts that “aliénation” in part explains why resources supporting an existing family are diverted to increase the number of wives, sacrificing “bien-être” ‘wellbeing’ for symbolic value (122). However, in the translation, the term “aliénation” is changed to “sheer brainwashing” (90), a shift that does not fully account for the way that alienation, in Marxist terms, symbolizes the connection between individual motives and social and economic structures. The shift prevents a full appreciation of Thiam’s detailed attention to and account of the political economy of polygamy—particularly, what she calls the “commercialisation du mariage” ‘commercialization of marriage’ and the commodification⁵ of women (125). Indeed, the translation removes mention of Karl Marx from the text and bibliography altogether.

Alienation is also a key concept in Thiam’s analysis of how Black people choose and are encouraged to whiten (144). As with polygamy, Thiam situates the political economy of whitening creams—their production, circulation, and consumption—in histories of colonization, slavery, and neocolonialism. Further, she links this economy to the way that such creams facilitate the distancing of Black people from their own bodies, and in so doing, subjecting their bodies to great medical risk. As part of her critique of whitening, she outlines how, in the face of enslavement and displacement, African Diasporic communities often choose “souffrant interieurement” ‘suffering internally’ over resistance (145). Like Fanon, she thus presents the social conditions that promote and reproduce an obsession with (and consciousness of) the body, that is both “self-negating” and “object[ifying]” (Fanon 60, 110-11). Her analysis also echoes Marx’s description of alienation as “self-estrangement,” a “practical” form of unfreedom that works partly by ceding power (78-79). As a term, alienation allows for attention to contradictions, and Thiam calls attention to the contradiction between male desires for whitened partners (nontraditional) and previously discussed justifications for polygamy (traditional) (149).

For Thiam, self-estrangement is promoted by advertising from skin-whitening companies, which she describes as false or “mensongère” because it promises better social standing, although such creams may actually lead to cancer. Here, we see the interplay between “ideological dissimulation” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak” 93) and self-estrangement. Instead, the translation omits the

⁵ The shift from “aliénation” to ‘brainwashing’ accompanies the translation of “marchandise” as ‘merchandise’ (95) rather than ‘commodities,’ removing terminological clues of Marxist analysis for an Anglophone audience.

linking of alienation and false advertising, changing the phrase “l’aliénation et la publicité mensongère” (Thiam 148) to simply “brainwashing” (Thiam, Blair 107). Transforming *s’aliène* and *aliénation* (Thiam 144, 145) into “denial” and “brainwashing” (Thiam, Blair 105), the translation further obscures the resonance between Thiam’s theorization with that of Fanon, Beauvoir, and Marx. This obscuring enacts what Batchelor calls a de-philosophizing effect.

“Untracing” Negritude

According to Batchelor, translations of Francophone African writers’ texts into English often remove “traces” of indigenous African languages and styles (*Decolonizing Translation* 77, 78). Such removals are present in the English translation of *La Parole*, as for example, some African terms within the body of the text disappear, such as *niominké* (Thiam 78), a specific group of the Serer; *kikongo* (141), a language of the Vili peoples in the Congo; and *tukula* (141), an “ougent” or anointing powder or paste made of kaolin and dried fruits. Such omissions erase a key project of ethnography, which is to provide local terminology as a way of recognizing people in their own terms. Here, I extend Batchelor’s discussion, naming the process of removing traces as “untracing,” and conceptualizing removals of not only African terms, but also African Diasporic epistemological stances—such as ways of thinking, as well as forming and evaluating truth claims. Specifically, the translation untraces Negritude and early theorizing of intersectionality.

In her own study of Senegalese literature, Blair devotes a whole chapter to Negritude, describing it as a “a call for black solidarity, a refutation of assimilation, the assertion of Negro-African heritage, and [...] the indictment of racism and a rallying cry for anticolonial polemics” (50). Despite this, the term *Négritude* is often erased in the translation of Thiam’s work. In the French text, Thiam uses the phrase “chantres de la négritude” on both pages 20 and 128. However, in the translation, “poets of Negritude” appears on page 14, while “prophets of Black life” appears on page 94. In the first reference, Thiam critiques Negritude poetic discourses about Black women that, while flattering, fail to recognize the realities of women’s lives. In the second, Thiam praises Negritude writers for challenging and deconstructing Western discourses of racial superiority. Notably, where Thiam names Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Léon Damas as some of the “écrivains de la Négritude” ‘writers of Négritude’ to be credited with this challenge (127), the term “Négritude” itself disappears from the translation on page 94.

The erasure of the term *Négritude* from the translation of *La Parole* echoes certain erasures of the insights of Negritude in the text. For example, in Thiam’s discussion of skin-whitening creams, she asks, “Qui pose les critères de beauté

européenne comme valeurs absolues pour des sociétés négro-africaines? Certainement pas la Nègresse. Mais le colon, le colonisé, et après eux, le néocolonisé” (149). In the translation, this question becomes: ‘Who establishes the criteria of European beauty in Black societies? Certainly not the Black woman. It was the colonial powers’ (Thiam, Blair 108). The shortening of “Mais le colon, le colonisé, et après eux, le néocolonisé” ‘it was the colonist, the colonized man, and, after them, the neo-colonized man’ to “It was the colonial powers” removes Thiam’s critique of the ways colonized and “neo-colonized” men themselves perpetuate racial and colonial ideologies, even in “postcolonial” conditions. Such a critique is a key one made by Negritude authors, particularly Fanon in *Les Damnés de la Terre*, a text which Thiam cites.

Within the section on skin-whitening, Thiam also cites Fanon’s *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), when he quips that Western laboratories were fascinated by the thought of developing a “sérum de dénégification” ‘serum for denegrification’ (143). Thiam then asks: “Le sérum de dénégification a-t-il été finalement découvert?” Blair translates this question as “Has the serum for skin-whitening finally been discovered?” (104). In fact, in all cases in which “dénégification” appears, including Fanon’s quote, Blair translates the word as “skin-whitening,” even though Thiam elsewhere employs the phrase “le blanchiment de la peau,” which literally means skin-whitening. Curiously, while Blair cites Charles Lam Markmann’s translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* in the bibliography, she does not use Markmann’s maintenance of the term “denegrification” on page 111. This replacement misrecognizes the subtle differences between “blanchiment” ‘whitening’ and “dénégification” (see, for instance, Gordon; Pierre 110).

Given that in French, the root *nègr*-⁶ ‘negro’ is an ethnological term, denegrifying means more than just a bleaching or *décolorant* ‘decolorant,’ but a subtraction of the multiple dimensions of blackness, which Fanon describes as “triple”—embodied, collective, and historical: “my body, my race, my ancestors” (112). Thus, dénégification as a term evokes the specificities of anti-Black racism, particularly violent erasures and bodily displacements—a sentiment Thiam expresses in phrases such as “génocide” ‘genocide’ and “la dissolution de l’être nègre-noir, [et...] la disparition pure et simple du Nègre de teint noir” (146) ‘the disintegration of Black individuality, and the disappearance of the dark-skinned African’ (Thiam, Blair 107).⁷

⁶ The term *nègre* has a complicated history. While it can be translated as ‘negro,’ it has pejorative and offensive connotations (see Harrison, 387-88).

⁷ Supporting the idea that the term “denegrification” signifies much more than “skin-whitening,” Nicolaj invokes the former term to describe Mauritania’s expulsion of tens of thousands of “Black Africans” during border disputes in the 1980s—an expulsion that “some observers” believed would be pursued until “complete” (476, 477).

The omissions that in effect untrace Negritude have a common pattern—namely, the subtraction of considerations of the “both/and.” The original text maintains both *dénégrification* and *blanchiment*; both “le colonisé et [...] le néo-colonisé” as a group and “le colon” as forces imposing beauty standards on African women; and the term *Négritude* in both a section of praise and one of critique. However, in each of those cases, the translation subtracts one of the terms—leaving only *blanchiment* as implicated in skin creams, only “le colon” as defining standards of beauty, and only critique as a site for naming *Négritude*. What is lost in translation, untraced, then, is Thiam’s “both/and” epistemology. This form of thinking considers the “contingency” of relations of power—“the permeability of the binary between oppressed and oppressor”—and is exactly the epistemology of intersectionality (Hancock 105-17, 147-52).

Invisibilization of Intersectionality

As Mianda argues, Thiam’s theoretical framework anticipates many of the insights of intersectionality theories of the 1980s and 1990s and is remarkable for its resonance with, yet development independent from, Anglophone Black feminist writers like Francis Beale and the Combahee River Collective, who produced concepts such as “double jeopardy” in 1969 and “interlocking systems of oppression” in 1977, respectively (13-14). In *La Parole aux Négrésses*, “Part 3: On Feminism and Revolution” serves as the central location for Thiam’s development of intersectional theories. Thiam lists the ways in which Black African women are “opprimée [...] triplement” ‘oppressed [...] triply’: “domination patriarcale” ‘patriarchal domination,’ “domination capitaliste” ‘capitalist domination,’ and “la mainmise coloniale ou néocoloniale sur son pays” ‘the colonial or neocolonial seizure of their country’ (Thiam 160; my translation). She also lists three oppressions she calls “trois fléaux” ‘three plagues’: “Sexisme—Racisme—Existence de class sociales (capitalisme, colonialisme ou néocolonialisme)” ‘sexism—racism—existence of social classes (capitalism, colonialism, or neocolonialism)’ (Thiam 160; my translation). While the translation maintains Thiam’s outlining of “a threefold oppression,” it compresses these two lists into one:

by virtue of her sex, she is dominated by man in a patriarchal society; by virtue of her class she is at the mercy of capitalist exploitation; by virtue of her race she suffers from the appropriation of her country by colonial or neocolonial powers. Sexism, racism, class division; three plagues! (Thiam, Blair 118)

However, this compression obscures Thiam's more nuanced contribution to intersectionality. Thiam develops this concept of triple oppression in her comparison of the situations for Black women in Africa to two different groups: "sa soeur" 'her sister' (159) in Latin America and women in Europe. In the first comparison, Thiam identifies a central difference in the particular histories and conditions of colonization (in Africa) versus enslavement (in Latin America) (159). According to Thiam, Black women in Latin America suffer a "double oppression de par sa couleur et son sexe:" "—*Noire*, elle est aussi surexploitée en tant que sexe. —Elle est sous-payée par rapport au Nègre d'Amérique latine" (159). In the translation this becomes: 'the Black woman [in Latin America is] [...] a victim of a double oppression. To sum up: she is exploited by virtue of her sex; her wages even undercut the low wage of the Latin American Black male' (Thiam, Blair 118). Here, the translation leaves out Thiam's emphasis on the terms by which Black women are doubly oppressed: "par sa couleur et son sexe" 'by her color and her sex.' It also excludes Thiam's terms of "Noire" and "surexploitée," the latter of which, as 'superexploitation,' is a key term for theories of intersectionality. Further, Thiam describes the "situation" for Black women as "intégrationniste, assimilationniste," given the limited modes for social mobility (159-60). However, the terms "integration" and "assimilation" do not appear in the translation (Thiam, Blair 118).

For Thiam, while Black African women's situation is like that of Black Latin American women in some ways, "la Nègro-Africaine doit aussi faire face" 'The Black African woman must also face' colonial expropriation, a "nouvelle oppression, la troisième" 'new oppression, the third' (Thiam 160; my translation). The translation compresses the sentence explaining this difference into Thiam's next comparison between European women and Black women—the former who decry "double oppression" (sex and class), and the latter who face oppression not only by sex and class, but also by race. Compressing these comparisons, the translation then conflates race and colonialism in the following clause: "by virtue of her race she suffers from appropriation of her country by colonial or neocolonial powers" (Thiam, Blair 118). In fact, if we maintain Thiam's distinction, then it is possible to read Black African women's oppression, not just as triple, but quadruple: subjection to racism, sexism, capitalist exploitation, and colonialism. Not only does the translation conflate race and colonialism, it erases the link that Thiam makes between capitalism and (neo)colonialism in creating social classes. As Fatima Ait Ben Lmadani and Nasima Moujoud assert, the "invisibilisation" 'invisibilization' of Francophone Black feminists' work and movements within mainstream feminist scholarship on intersectionality operates by erasing key insights on how colonization, migration, and transnationalism can and must factor into intersectional analyses (14-15).

Another aspect of what Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud term invisibilization includes the erasures of 1) the diversity within French and Western feminisms and 2) the historical relations and dialogues between majoritarian French feminists and Francophone Black feminists (16). Indeed, the authors call these practices not just erasures, but “*impensés*” (16) ‘unthought’ or ‘unthinkable.’ The largest omission from the translation of Thiam’s original text is roughly three and a quarter pages, in the section “Feminism and Revolution,” of her analysis of feminist movements and situations in the United States, England, and France, as well as Europe more generally. In those pages (169-72), she provides a brief genealogy of feminist movements in each region, from the seventeenth century to the present—focusing particularly on suffragist movements. For the United States and France, she delineates multiple types of existing feminisms. For the former, she identifies “*trois tendances dans le féminisme*” ‘three trends (or currents) in US feminism’: “*conservatrice; politique : «Les passionnées de politique»; féministe radicale: nouvelle tendance dominante de nos jours*” (170-71) ‘conservative; liberal: “*politicos*”; radical feminist: a new trend dominant today.’⁸ For France, she identifies the following “*diverses tendances*” ‘diverse trends’: “*trotskyistes, psychanalyse et politique, le cercle Dimitriev, les léninistes révolutionnaires, lesbiennes, etc.*,” ‘Trotskyist, psychoanalytic and political, the Elizabeth Dimitriev Circle, revolutionary Leninists, lesbian feminists, etc.’⁹ highlighting the fact that the feminist movement is not “*homogène*” (172) ‘homogeneous.’ Here, Thiam explores a central tension in feminist and intersectionality studies—the idea that feminisms can be global, united under the “*même combat*” (167) ‘same fight,’ yet also plural and produced from particular material conditions. As she mentions, in order to ascertain the common ‘identity’ of women’s struggles globally, it is necessary to account for “*la condition spécifique des femmes dans les pays du tiers monde, en Afrique noire et dans les pays industrialisés*” (169) ‘the specific conditions of women in countries of the Third World, in Black Africa and in industrialized countries.’ However, the translation omits the sentence about specific conditions as it does Thiam’s attempt to briefly outline these conditions in England, France, and the US. Thus, the omission invisibilizes Thiam’s etic and historical-particularist understanding of Western feminisms, which like the omission of footnotes, refuses her anthropological perspective and authority. It also reproduces the dual *impensés* Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud describe as the inability to view Western feminism as both non-homogeneous and also in relation to and in dialogue with the ex-colonies.

⁸ See the taxonomy of feminism of Shulamith Firestone (58-62) whose work Thiam cites.

⁹ For further discussion of these different trends, see Huston.

Front Matter

The invisibilization of Thiam's anthropological authority, representation of Western/French dialogue with ex-colonies, notions of non-homogeneity, and attention to issues of coloniality in the section theorizing intersectionality sheds light on the front matter—specifically, the title, cover, opening poem, and the opening line of Thiam's text. While the translated title *Speak Out, Black Sisters* does capture the sense of *parole* in its everyday use as the practice of speech, it does not quite allude to the importance of the term *parole* within French anthropology and linguistics (see Levi-Strauss, for example). In Thiam's text, *parole* carries significance not only as political speech, but also as a key repository of knowledge African women produce about the conditions in which they live (22, 155). These voices and conditions must not be ignored or silenced, neither by African men in post- or neo-colonial conditions, nor by feminists who claim universality. However, the phrasing of the English title as an imperative for or directive toward Black women in Africa limits the audience. This shift, like the erasure of the section on Western feminism, denies a dialogic relationship with “the West.”

Remarking on the subtitle of the first edition of the English translation, “Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa,” Elena Cuasante Fernández argues that the subtitle not only “desvirtúa el objetivo de Thiam,” ‘elides the purpose of Thiam's text,’ but it also “lo asimila” ‘assimilates it’ into a feminism that *La Parole* itself calls into question (49n21). Fernández's critique equally applies to the cover of the second edition of the Blair translation, in which a quote from Malcolm X (“To educate a woman is to educate a nation...”) is superimposed upon artwork depicting various African women. The layering of a man's words over African women, themselves represented as non-speaking, counters the very purpose of the book, while the choice assimilates Thiam into English-language hegemony by ignoring the Black Francophone authors and activists Thiam actually does cite. Fernández's critique further applies to the shift in meaning produced in the translations of multiplicity in Thiam's opening poem, changing a “multitude de voix” (13) ‘a multitude of voices’ to “countless voices in unison” (vi). This substitution reduces multiplicity to assimilation and echoes the replacement of the word “multiplicité” (156) ‘multiplicity’ in the original text—which Thiam uses to reference the multiple struggles women face and which is a term so key to later theorizations of intersectionality—with “complexity and diverse nature” (Thiam, Blair 115).

Finally, Thiam begins Part I of her text with the question: “Prise, réappropriation, restitution de la parole?” (17) ‘The taking (or claiming), reappropriation, or restitution of the power to speak’ (my translation). However, the translation poses different questions: “Are they now beginning to find their

voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves?" (Thiam, Blair 11). Perhaps, this shift is due to the difficulty in translating *prise de la parole* in English. In the text, Blair translates "prise de la parole" or "prendre la parole" as to 'take the floor' (11, 13) or 'speak out' (11, 40). However, the senses conveyed by *réappropriation* and *restitution* are lost when translated as "find[ing] voice" and "claim[ing] the right to speak for themselves." When Thiam uses *réappropriation* again on the first page, she urges women to reclaim their voices ("la parole") and even truth, "la vrai" (17-18), "la vérité" (20), in the face of patriarchy and capitalism. Later in the text, she uses the verb "s'approprier" 'appropriate' to refer to colonialism and land seizure (155). Thus, the substitution of "réappropriation de la parole" removes the connection Thiam makes between *parole* and struggles against patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Further, the word and the politics of *restitution* disappear in the translation, echoed by the erasures of Thiam's uses of the prefix "re" in the introductory paragraphs—in "prennent ou reprennent la parole" and "(re)découvrent leur voix" 'rediscover their voices' (17). The subtraction of "re" accompanies an addition of the phrase 'even if they are not used to speaking for themselves' (Thiam, Blair 11), which is inconsistent both with Thiam's notion of gendered practices in Africa and elsewhere as historically contingent and shifting (see also Thiam 186), and with Thiam's mention in the following paragraph of histories in which African women did possess "leur mot à dire" (17) 'their say' (11). The overall effect of the removal of the question "Prise, réappropriation, ou restitution de la parole?" from the translation is a disarticulation (or de-linking) of the politics for reclaiming voice from projects of decolonization. Further, it is dehistoricizing because it creates an image of African women's silence as historically unchanged and uninfluenced by forces of colonial expropriation and capitalist expansion.

Conclusion

In deformatizing the text by removing footnotes, numbers, and references, as well as domesticating the text by replacing theoretical terms with English idioms, the translation undermines Thiam's academic authority. In invisibilizing Thiam's distinctions between colonialism and racism, and her historicizing the multiplicity of Western feminism, the translation undermines a key theme throughout the text: that is, the need to pay attention to specificity, particularly in mobilization for revolutionary change. In de-philosophizing the text by removing alienation and references to Marxism, the translation casts a shadow on Thiam's analysis of political economy and theoretical engagements. And in untracing Negritude by removing the term and key insights—namely, the specificities of anti-Blackness and reproduction of colonial ideologies in post-coloniality—the translation undermines Thiam's call for radical reflexivity, a concept central within the

genealogy of intersectionality. Because English serves as a vehicle for undermining Thiam's authority, theoretical contributions, and activist insights, the translation contributes both to the tendency to disregard the theoretical contributions of African writers and to English-language hegemony.

In measuring the silences, what is erased in the translation sheds light on the politics of erasure concerning Black women in Africa and the Diaspora. Consider the second-largest omission, where the translation erases several pages (132-34) of Thiam's critique of Malian sociologist Fodé Diawara in his stance on polygamy. Here, she takes issue with the ways in which Diawara's anti-colonial defense of polygamy denies intimacy, love, and voice for African women. Within the excised portions are Thiam's use of Marx (132) and Herbert Marcuse (134), sarcastically even, to further point to the ways in which Diawara's critique of colonialism is undermined by his failure to extend a materialist analysis to Black women's situations. For Thiam, Diawara substitutes his own prejudgments for careful examination and dialogue with women themselves (134), engaging only "sa subjectivité" (131) 'his subjectivity.' Thiam's critique reveals how Diawara's anti-colonial defense of polygamy is both evident of a postcolonial biopolitics (see Lowe 195)—an attempt to manage African women's "sexuality, affect, marriage and family"—and also a "disavowal" of Black women's subjective, economic, and political situations or situatedness. Thus, Thiam raises a central theoretical issue. Not only is it important to contextualize and critique the political economy of alienation (as she indicates in the sections on polygamy and whitening creams), but it is also imperative to raise awareness of the alienation of Black women from critiques and analyses of political economy.

Like Thiam, Black women who engaged with international Communist movements and politics even predating the WWII era called attention to such alienation, developing concepts of "triple exploitation" and "superexploitation" to capture the need to (a) fully recognize Black women as agents and potential revolutionary subjects; (b) apply rigorous materialist analysis to the situations of Black women; and (c) position Black women in internationalist politics (McDuffie 112-13). So, the alienation of Black women from critiques and analysis of political economy manifests in the inability to imagine Black women as having agency, revolutionary leadership, and specific, heterogeneous material conditions. As Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi mention, the theoretical "dislocation" of African feminist scholars (118-19) occurs alongside the "objectification" of African women as non-agentic and perpetual victims (124). Similarly, Kelly Coogan-Gehr remarks on the concurrent invisibilization in feminist studies of both "the structural forces that render [Black women's] [...] success nearly impossible" (96) and the "radical critique of capitalism advanced by black feminist scholars" (93). By erasing Thiam's critique of this process of alienation, the translation also engages in it, by undermining Thiam's academic

authority, as well as her theorization of political economy, attention to specificity, and dialogue with other feminisms. As Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud caution, feminist politics can claim to “donner la parole” (17) ‘give voice,’ yet also “délégitimer cette parole” (17) ‘delegitimize that voice.’

Thiam’s work pushes us to imagine societies that are “non-aliené,” (164) ‘non-alienated’ in which we neither succumb to ideological dissimulation—ceding power to others as we distance ourselves from our own bodies and labors—nor distance ourselves from other people through mechanisms of enslavement, domination, colonization, or subordination (164). Further, we have to ask when we substitute our own subjective understandings for women’s self-defined struggles, when we misrecognize women by denying their specific situations, their relations to us, their agency, their voices—especially in languages other than English—are we not also still alienated?

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