

The Performative Grammars of Civic Action: Decolonizing Interstices of Language through Theatricalizing Sheng

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Abstract

Martin Banham's 'Languages of African Theatre' evaluates artists torn between creating in English and writing in vernaculars. He asks, how can artists 'decolonize the spirit' of performing in the settler's language without limiting what they say and how they say it? Banham goes on to argue that performance with its hybrid and transcendent multiple tongues allows for rich territory in which to both decolonize a subjugated past while bringing cultures together more freely and equally.

With this article, I problematize Banham's proposal by analyzing from multiple positionalities a performance about language devised by students while I was a visiting professor in Kenya. The project: explore how youth employ the African Urban Youth Language 'Sheng' to build identity and resist oppressive systems. This performance was steeped in irony as the common ground for the theatre project was English, the oppressive lexicon of the students' colonized past yet my only fluent language. Thus, as Banham attests, the artists used tools of 'grammar' and 'politics of performance' they had at their disposal to negotiate the performance landscape. Through the lenses of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*, Janelle Reinelt's artists as 'citizens-in-the-making,' echoed by Banham's belief in the potential for theatre to transcend rigid borders and systems of power, I analyze a performance that liberated language while simultaneously being bound by it.

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history.

-- Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Me, I can't wait for a day when Kenyan English becomes an option on Word.

--Sitawa Namwalie, Kenyan poet, playwright, performance artist

INTRODUCING SHENG

'A language in a hurry...' is how Michela Wrong describes Sheng, an African Urban Youth Language (AUYL), in her exposé about Kenyan whistleblower John Githongo.¹ Also described as the '*de facto* lingua franca of Kenya's urban youth' (Samper 2004: 50, n1), Wrong goes on to say, '...it did away with the grammar and spellings slowing Kiswahili and English down...' (Wrong 2009: 151). Wrong and Samper are echoing a grave concern about Sheng's detrimental effects on more 'legitimate' languages. But also on focus is an implied speeding up of its evolution and transmission marking an urgent communication need. So one could argue that a pointed passing by of the two monolingual systems that dominate Kenya's urban areas, Sheng's interlocutors have exposed linguistic interstices they are quickly trying to fill. And that this lack actually holds great potential.

There has been some dispute as to the base language of the Sheng code. Is it Swahili, or English, or one of the many indigenous languages spoken in Kenya? Also did Sheng originate in the 1930s (Mazrui 1995) or in the 80's like Wrong and others assert (Githiora 2002; Ogechi 2002, 2007, 2008; Samper 2004). Although no consensus has been reached on origin, there is agreement for place. Sheng was first spoken by residents in the lower socio-economic neighborhood of Eastlands, carving covert ways to communicate while hustling to make a few shillings. Interestingly, if Swahili and English provide the base languages, many of its original speakers were not well versed in either, mostly because they didn't attend formal British schooling. In addition, Swahili's origins, outside of and well before the colonial period, began as a mish mash of Arabic and Bantu languages to become the eventual

monolingual system of Kenya's national language. Yet in Eastlands, Swahili is not the primary language learned by children: speaking in their mother-tongues at home, mixed with small bits of Swahili, and then English only if they attend school. There is a wry playfulness about Sheng which plies and bends the settler's language to meet its speakers' needs. Swahili too has had to share space with English that still dominates the education system, bridges Kenya to the global arena, and binds it to its colonial past. Sheng itself is an acronym based on the words 'Swahili, English and Slang': a truncated symbol of the entwined linguistic and historical web of this post-colonial East African country.

Sometimes in a single utterance, Kenyans code-switch gracefully and subconsciously between Swahili, English, their mother-tongues and Sheng. Some linguists claim that native languages indeed swirl around and within Sheng's utterances counter-posing the English/Swahili/Slang code with the ancestral vestiges of Kikuyu, Luo and others that make up the rich multi-lingual landscape. Polyglots engaging opportunistic and meaningful sounds breathe and weave through the lives and social fabric of Kenya, grasping at all codes available to successfully navigate daily challenges.

So as Wrong (2009) attests to above, Swahili and English provide the bracing for Sheng speakers to push against. A dynamic momentum drives the unstable code into the larger spoken world, just long enough to glimpse before submerging back underground, where it shape-shifts and rises back to the surface to alter membership extended only to those who can quickly adapt to its short-lived grammar. Mazrui (1995) describes the ephemerality of Sheng:

The continuous absorption of new members into the Sheng culture has naturally contributed

to the para-code's dynamic form, to its changing expressions that promote linguistic divergence at one level (the ethnic level) and convergence at another level (the group level) Furthermore, this accommodation phenomenon also gives Sheng expressions their relative *ephemeral* character. (1995: 174)

Sheng's agents use their language in continual and hard-to-pin-down play, paying it forward from Swahili and English. With a changing cast of characters who navigate through the informal public stages of Nairobi, they brandish their pride for where they come from by each time-bound utterance and cloaked iteration. This brings a valor to locations in Nairobi not usually heralded as such as the more 'authentic' versions of Sheng have been known to originate from the slums and are caustically called 'street-based slang' (Samper 2004: 50, n1; Ferrari 2015). Despite the criticism, there is much pride in this purely Kenyan tongue.

As an artist of the ephemeral codes of theatre, I am fascinated by how languages work, how they shape and ply the art form with its own set of shifting and ephemeral mimetic codes, dominated by inside (the artists)/outside (the audience) memberships and the reciprocal, fragile, mercurial relationship that spans between. So imagine my delight when asked by a colleague to devise a performance with Nairobi theatre students about their living, theatrical-like language.² The mission of the project: dramatize how Kenyan youth use Sheng to build identity and to subvert oppressive systems of power. But, here's the rub. Ironically, the way the ensemble would communicate, with a white western mostly-monolingual professor at the helm, would be through English.

This paper will define the shifting grammars of politics and power that the artists used to create a performative 'code-in-between' and articulate lessons learned: how to embrace ambiguity, how to hand over the power of the pen, and how to create a show from what you don't know. Through the artistic process, my visiting U.S. scholar position at Kenyatta University was ultimately decolonized. This toppling left interstices the artists filled with a primacy and legitimacy rarely afforded to both them and to the language they proudly, playfully use. In the rehearsal process and performance, Kenyan youth reclaimed a social space that has traditionally reinforced in them feelings of defeat, anxiety and a minimizing of their worth. Coinciding with Sheng's rapidly evolving use, Kenyan youth are becoming bolder and less apologetic about how their voices are heard. This performance gave them a platform to shout and sing Sheng from previously sanctioned and sacrosanct stages.

LEARNING THEIR GRAMMARS³

Theatre is an art form articulated by a multiplicity of symbolic and practical languages that at once appear, abstract, crystallize and morph in front of the eyes of artists and audience, before vanishing, never formed in the exact same way again. The hope is that a somewhat common interpretation is grasped before the ghosting. There is a certain trust that perches precariously on that communication bridge between the producers and the receivers, built on an unutterable but known codes, a 'grammar of performance' that suspends disbelief, accepted by both artist and audience in order for the play of the play to survive.

Theatre manifests a negotiated politics, in the broadest sense, relating to transactional systems of power. For purposes in this paper, a 'politics' is defined by who gets what, where and how. A 'grammar of politics' in performance is relational to one who owns and doles out meaning (the producers of the performance), propelled by the requirements of performativity (conventions and shifting symbology), and who receives it accurately on the other side of the footlights (the body politic of the audience). Performativity is used as a philosophical term, in so far as it calls attention to the ecology of the relational meaning systems at play: where a certain performance act happens, when and how it survives. That is to say, the performance discussed here would carry different ecologies of meaning connected to place. For example, whether done indoors in a formal space or in a public place on the streets of Mathare.⁴ The landscape affects how and if the ecologies of meaning grow.

Judith Butler (1993) first used the term 'performative' to emphasize the 'reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (as qtd. in Reinelt 2014a: 18n3). Like an accordion that compresses and frees and frames music and air, theatre also has a living container that borders how stories, words and bodies are mimetically aspired. And sometimes there is slippage beyond the narratives and their enclosure. Theatre is both real and fictional at once, with a very thin membrane in-between that keeps those two entities barely separate and in an uneasy embrace. Too much reality, theatre fails. Too much drama, a connection to the real can't keep up.

Like the theatre, the Sheng code too has its transactional grammar held by a taut, permeable and time-bound/

time-sensitive container. Like the real and fictional of theatre, it is two things at once. 'Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture' (Thiong'o 1981: 13). Martin Banham (1996) addressed the inherently political dilemma of choice by playwrights, specifically in Nigeria, torn between using the settler's (yet universal) English or one or more of the many vernacular tongues of the imperially-drawn nation-state. (Of note, Nigeria is also home to one of the most globally recognizable and studied forms of pidgin, an African Urban Youth Language.⁵) In 'Languages of Africa: A Nigerian Casebook,' Banham asks how best to 'decolonize the spirit' of African people without delimiting what they have to say' by forcing it through the Western sieve of English (1996: 162). To begin, he reaches across Sub-Sahara to invoke Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972, 1981). His seminal treatise, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), ultimately argues that artists should write in their indigenous tongues in order to speak with and to their own communities like he eventually did by employing only Gikuyu in his plays. Vying for a universal audience is a betrayal to one's art, culture, and ultimately nation.

Salman Rushdie's (1991) essay, 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance,' advocated for writers from previously colonized countries to 'write back' and 'bring back' local vernaculars, traditional practices and forms in their purity for yet-to-be literature, arts and politics of the 'modern' African today. Ngugi also resisted this appeal. 'There are people, honest people who confuse culture with irrelevant traditionalism; it is surely not possible to lift traditional structures and cultures intact into modern Africa' (1972: 12). One cannot bring back what no longer exists, he claimed. Ngugi

also warned that one must remember language is culture's keeper and holds an ever more precious responsibility (or response-ability⁶) as those histories of pre-colonial Africa disappear. 'Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (1981: 12, my emphasis).⁷ Modern language(s) cannot be the same, literally, as those from the past but can retain a sort of essence what has been lost.

Within the receptacle of language, and its mere sliver of a membrane that lies between the lexicology and what it carries, there remains an interstice to be filled, a residual gap which holds a space for the echoes of people's historical experiences within its fragile linguistic form. To be vital and fulfill the function of communication codes, Kenyan language(s) cannot dispense with containing the lifeblood of their recent and remote pasts. It is the vessel of language that struggles a fraught history forward, collapsing two origins into a diaglossic tongue uttered by those bound to both a pre- and post-colonial existence. Ngugi knits together language's and culture's responsibilities to what has come before. The transactional and political necessity to ensure the transmission of one's culture into the present rests in what language can not only transport and but what surfaces from within these linguistic spaces of in-between. 'How best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience?' (1981: 7)

Perhaps then best to heed Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who believed in the social constructionist power of linguistic engineering. 'I feel that English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings' (qtd. in Thiong'o 1981: 8). Considering the persistence and continual emergences of AUYLs across the

continent, it would appear that new form has yet to be found or legitimized; that a 'new' English, as Achebe terms it, or a small 'e' english code, or a new form of any 'settler's language 2.0' will never provide the culture keeping container that young Africans desire/require.⁸ With countries like Kenya having upwards of 75% of the population under the age of thirty-five, no wonder a language like Sheng is in a hurry to be that vessel, to be the form that finds its way like water into the interstices between what was, is and hopes to be. I want to posit that Sheng—a stigmatized, unstable AUYL—is a viable option for this task and that the performance described below demonstrates how the code boldly carries that weight.

What we as an ensemble were tasked to do was to make something artistic and valuable from this laden-language delivered by the people it hails from. This became our shared theatrical grammar: the student artists found Sheng an original culture-creator source of power and something proprietary: for Kenyan youth by Kenyan youth. An indigenous invention that provides Kenyan artists and writers, if they are so willing to embrace it, a system of linguistic and cultural codes truly, uniquely, and democratically, theirs. Understanding this reality about Sheng, coupled with the fact that I would comprehend little of a piece of theatre that would amplify this youth-full language at its center, I was also forced to reassess my own power and the praxis of forming artistic relationships. Sheng's lexical system required something new of me, a process not yet defined, to somehow know it, or at the very least, lean in to learning it. The student-artists became my teachers. By their lead, they moved me towards a better understanding of both the politics of this grammar and their performativity of Sheng. The following are the lessons I learned.

GRAMMAR LESSONS

Lesson #1: Embrace Ambiguity

ESSY: Language provides clarity and can be used to tone down differences, but...

JOHN: Most of us have used language...

SILAS: to define who we are.

DENNIS: to be different.

FRIDAH: to be unique.

ESSY: to lift each other up.

BONNY: to put someone down.

OJ: to build bridges

DENNIS: to separate

JOHN: to hustle

FIONA: to help

SILAS: to express ourselves

ALL: TO UNITE.⁹

Kenneth Burke's (1945) *A Grammar of Motives*, defines 'grammar' to mean 'the basic forms of thought' (qtd. in Rai and Reinelt 2104a: 3). Breaking down function and purpose, he insists on unpacking grammar's value in ambiguity. '[He wants] *not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*' (2014a: xviii, emphasis in original). Burke argues for language-based *practices* that investigate ambiguity and ultimately clarify the resources of and needs for that vagueness. '...it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place; in fact, *without such areas, transformation would be impossible*' (2014a: xix, my emphasis). The students found joy in the ambiguity our rehearsal process revealed: 1) by controlling the dispensation of an elusive language that can never be truly understood or known by an outside power; 2) by participating in Viewpoints, an embodied, nonverbal horizontally-defined ensemble building technique in a repurposed, after-hours

classroom space; which 3) opened up playful gaps that not only rehearsed ambiguity but altered positions of power.

In exploring identity and language with Kenyan youth, Ogechi characterizes Sheng as '...an imaginative and innovative "private language"...often with the intention of being *ambiguous* and misunderstood in order to exclude outsiders from their group' (2008: 81, my emphasis). Inherent in the language system is its tendency to not only exclude for protection but to continually reshape who belongs and who does not, who understands its 'we-codes' and who cannot. Sheng's intersection with theatre makes potential for this changing membership infinitely possible. There is productivity in inventiveness, power in exclusion. Kenyan students deliberately and playfully chose when and how to use their we-codes. My membership to the inner circle was gatekept at their mercy.

This is not to say that we couldn't communicate quite well together. The students are so used to speaking English in education settings that although this was extra-curricular time and space, it was common practice. However, it presented an opportunity to throw off vestiges of being deferential to the professor since the performance itself was about subverting oppressive systems through language. As a sovereign strategy, they decided when to defer to English. The irony of my dependency on their dispensation of power throughout the process wasn't lost on me.

Viewpoints (Bogart and Landau 2005) provided another such strategic vocabulary. I had the terms of the technique, which I interpreted for the students as a sort of transactional reciprocity to their deliberate translations of Sheng for me. However, the ensemble coopted the improvisational technique in order to fulfill motives (i.e. grammar)

for gaining new theatrical knowledge. Viewpoints exercises explore temporal and spatial planes with movement vocabularies that transcend the verbal realm. Herewe discovered that the borders and boundaries of unshared languages could be reshaped with unspoken codes. A performance ‘grammar’ full of embodied terms like Gesture, Tempo, Repetition, Architecture, Shape, Kinesthetic Response, Topography, Spatial Relationship became the common means of inquiry we used to exploit ambiguity left by the gaps between our spoken languages. Viewpoints allowed us to move beyond lacks to agreed upon narratives. Repeatable phrases of movement discovered in rehearsal resurfaced in the performance itself, giving authorship to the students and helping them tell crucial parts of their stories that no longer depended solely on verbal translation.

In her invocation of Burke, Janelle Reinelt, who has long theorized about the abundance of potentially productive spaces for change in theatrical practice, claims ‘it is precisely in the ambiguities of where politics and performance intersect that we might find the possibility of (political) transformations’ (2014a: 4). In these interstices, relations of power can be altered. However, the power inequities must also be known in so far as where those limits are. Clinical psychologist Resmaa Menakem (2017, 2020a, 2020b) works with racialized trauma and the toll this has taken on individuals who have a long history of suffering. ‘Bodies of culture’ are continually forced to negotiate spaces that aren’t welcoming, exhausting output.¹⁰ Menakem believes that in order to heal from accumulated trauma, ‘You’re gonna have to get up against your own sufferings’ edge before the transformation happens.’¹¹

Through Viewpoints, through the

project’s intersections with theatre, through dismantling a person in power who reflects Kenya’s history of colonization, the embodied performativity of unknowing ambiguity pushed past decorum borders into the margins of possibility. The content of the piece contained the sufferings of Kenyan youth and possible ways through them by new and shared non-spoken languages. As a means to surpass hardships’ piercing properties, gesture and movement softened sharp edges. Reorientations hardened new planes of existence. Centering the Sheng code (rather than English) in rehearsals created a space in which to reshape traditional power relationships of us/ them, inside/outside, director/actor, we-code/they-code. Rigid binary systems dissolved into democratized spaces and ‘a shared linguistic code, reinforcing group membership, and indicating shared knowledge and interests and the all-important sense of belonging’ (Ogechi 2008: 81). The communal experience came from co-creating a performance propped up by Sheng. This youth identity marker and keeper of culture was a linguistic lifeline for the cast of characters and their script.

Lesson #2: Know What You Don’t Know

FRIDAH: (*overlapping with above*)
I am so frustrated by this mess;
it makes no sense; too much jargon
I don’t understand.

Creating a new, shared code took time. Sometimes this process was painstakingly long. For my role, it required an absolute release of temporal and knowledge control as I basically comprehended next to nothing of the content nor managed how the time was used. At

first, I resisted. In the vein of devising new work, I commanded the students to come up with experiences in which the language they used determined whether or not they had navigated situations successfully. I would then decide what would become part of the final script, holding on to the ultimate artistic decision-making power.

The content proposed was as one would imagine--dealing with all sorts of relationships, life in university, career choices, money and the public transportation culture (which in Kenya is a space for youth to show off their prowess in ever-changing Sheng). The student-artists kept advocating for two central scenes that one of the ensemble members had written: a spoken word piece valuing the voices of Kenyan youth in the face of government corruption and a scene of what I perceived was an extreme public response to a street kid who steals a phone. At the time, I felt that neither of these had the spirit of the proposed project. It became obvious to the students that my resistance was a lack of local knowledge. The only possible solution: give over epistemological authority to the dramaturgical curators. The students (not me) determined what stayed in(side), what got left out(side), when Sheng was used and when English. They archived the domain in which they indelibly carve artistic citizenship.

Theatre is a body politic. Reinelt argues that any 'new political initiatives concerning citizenship-in the making,' [like theatre, like grassroots activism] need to take into account 'exclusion and deliberate disaffiliation in addressing its tasks' (2014b: 41). Completing the piece successfully essentially depended on my exclusion. I had to get out of the way in order to move the scriptwriting into permanence, fully dependent on the students' collective knowledge and

dispensation of it. *I knew, and they knew, that I didn't and couldn't ever fully know.* One of the most contributive means for democratic citizenship building between teachers and students is to find a space in which to equal their laboring. In this specific instance, rather than it being required for one underserving, for one who represented an accumulated history of that subjugation, their continual acts of translation were affirmed. Decorum and undeserved deference handed *me* the 'response-ability' to grant them permission to transcend those taboos.

Etienne Balibar argues the act of translation is 'the medium of communication and the *key language above all others* in contrast to monolingual national languages and especially educational systems' (2003: 172, my emphasis). Reinelt's interpretation of Balibar *vis a vis* theatre is worth quoting at length:

I would like to propose the theatre as a possible worksite for democracy and citizenship in Balibar's sense. The kind of negotiation of determinate matter among social actors he identifies as key to the worksite idea is precisely the sort of embodied repertoire available in theatrical performance. The theatre's contribution to the public sphere is limited to its local impact, from one point of view, but as performances travel, and keeping in mind Balibar's emphasis on translation, theatre also contributes to sectors beyond the local, even to the global, as it circulates. (2014b: 42)

Out of necessity, constant translation became the norm. Happening during the informal co-curricular time and on the makeshift 'stages' where we rehearsed, a productive worksite for

grassroots democracy emerged beyond the sanctioned spaces, regimented time and conscripted power found in Kenya's formal education system. The 'artist/citizens-in-the-making' brought raw material into rehearsal and fed it to me by improvised tools of instruction, explaining not only what the language was, what the context should be, but why it worked and most importantly what it meant for the final piece. Thus, we forged ahead on the energies, grammars and sites of translation, teaching, democracy and citizenship. '*...We all need to engage in [and have a space for] a political practice of citizenship-in-the-making,*' argues Reinelt again interpreting from the original (Balibar 2003).

In hindsight (site), the stage for a worksite of democracy was always set, based both on my illiteracies yet my desire for the performance to amplify the students' worth. The foundational block was admitting to what I didn't know and trusting the students to dole out the knowledge required for me to still lead. This transactional translation process of play-building required a delicate handing over instruments of ownership to the Kenyan youth. They used performance tools to disassemble rigid, antiquated systems of power, by way of the stigmatized code of Sheng, a language they embraced as crucial for their survival (which I would come to understand much later). On their side, once I loosened my hold on the artistic tools, they were willing to pick them up, to gamble their knowledge for a body politic in the power-laden landscape of the university still at odds over the value of Sheng.

Lesson #3: Knowledge 'knows it shows'

'There are some days when no matter what I say it feels like I'm far away in another country and whoever is doing the translating has had far too much to drink.'

--Brian Andreas, 'Lost in Translation'

I was continually lost in translation. But the students and I played our way through a series of reciprocal acts to build a performance text ready for the public.¹² Sometimes the use of a (public) space will assert a political dimension about place and/or a people where the latter are not normally identifiable as imbued with credible power. This public performance took place as part of a multi-day linguistics conference held at Kenyatta University, co-hosted by the Center for African Studies. The event presented the student-artists with a platform from which to speak their newly gained grammars to power. Performance is relational and self-conscious, reflexive and transactional. It is both keenly aware of audience and the information being shaped and disseminated for anticipated agreement. '*Performance knows it shows*' (Reinelt 2014a: 4).

Within the performance site, relations of power are momentarily up for renegotiation. *All* of the 'grammars of performance and power,' those wielded by actors, spectators and the art form itself, live in a somewhat arrested, temporary liminal space, an interstice, a 'code-in-between.'¹³ The dialogue of the script flows between three entities (the we-code, they-code, and in-between-code). This triangulation emphasizes 'reciprocity for maintaining cooperation' and the possibility that 'speakers can negotiate multiple identities especially

in multilingual and *diglossic* societies depending on situation and context' (Ogechi, 2008: 77, my emphasis). In actuality, a heteroglossic stage emerged, or performance site for multiple voices.

To my surprise, the two scenes referenced above not only survived but thrived in the heteroglossic space of 'in-between.' In both, relationships of power, primacy and the rights of civic action were framed for debate in such a way that the student-artists had the last words. The first begins with university students scoffing at the most recent arrest and release of a corrupt politician. They debate in English whether or not to care as they have no power to affect situation or outcome. Reena asks her friends what any of this has to do with her. As she gestures over-dramatically to make her point, a 'street boy,' seeing opportunity in the moment, makes off with the phone in her hand.¹⁴ The thief does not get far before he is stopped by a crowd who drag him to the ground. 'CHOMA! CHOMA!' ('Burn him! Burn him!'). What seemed to be an extreme measure for a petty crime (and what I initially failed to understand has a long history) actually distills the political landscape, fluctuating power structures and residual helplessness felt by everyday Kenyans. An uneasy snapshot of accumulated effects of struggle igniting to an imminent act of violence amplified my 'they code.' While in desperation, the boy pled for his life by using the 'in-between code'.

STREET BOY: (*begging in Sheng to Gidi*) Pia wewe Brathe undai wanichome? Elewa leo nilikuwa unenge. Ata ningeends niuze nikalishe mathe na mabro. Pia wao wamedoze mtaani hawana cha kudema. Brathe, waambie tu wasare. Ambia msupa nimesema pole!

[Translation: You too bro, you want

them to burn me. Understand I was hungry. I was to sell it to feed my mum and brothers. They are at home with no food. Bro, tell them to stop. Tell the lady I'm sorry!]

GIDI, one of the university students speaking English moments before recognizes/hears something (perhaps of himself) in the child's cries for mercy. He appeals to the angry crowd that has gathered to mete out justice rather than to have faith in the institutionalized legal system. GIDI entreats, 'Guys, stop, everybody! Nobody is going to die here today.' He then switches from the 'they-code' of English to establish a 'we' by also speaking in Sheng to the boy:

GIDI: Brathe, mbona ukaamua kuibia msupa? Ungekuja tu utuombe na hatungekunyima...

Kuibia watu haifai kuwa solution brathe. Lazima i vijana tuhustle ndo tupate chenye tunataka.

[Translation: Why did you steal from the lady? You could have borrowed; we could have given you...Stealing is not the solution, we as the youth have to work for what we want.]

The use of Sheng by GIDI to create a reciprocal 'we-code' with the STREET BOY not only builds empathy between them but literally keeps the boy alive. GIDI better understands why the boy stole and urgently translates that reality to the mob who hold his life in their hands. After giving a different life-lesson to the boy, GIDI turns translator to the in-scene 'they-code' crowd (and by implication the audience) and appeals to them in English in order to stop what is about to occur. By code-switching between 'we' and 'they,' Sheng and English, and moving fluidly through the performance time and space of the

‘in-between-code,’ he usurps (historical) authority for himself and builds the bridge of translation empathy out to the audience when/if they need it. For that moment, he controls *all* the codes of performance, politics and power over another’s life. Saving the young boy from harm at the micro-level mirrors and advocates for the overall value of young Kenyans, despite what language(s) they speak and the lives they have been forced into on the macro.

This exchange in Sheng also shames hegemony as GIDI implicates the audience and by extension the larger community with his next line:

GIDI: (*Looking at the crowd*) I see amongst you mothers and fathers. How could you support burning a child, stealing to survive?

Posed in English, his question forces a longitudinal view that exposes violent effects of years of trickle-down corruption from the top. The arrested dramatic moment ceases a potentially detrimental civic action for public justice. The centering of the unstable Sheng code and decentering English (except in the way that English gets incrementally and deliberately handed out to the audience for comprehension) demonstrates a vital necessity for all of the liminal voices to be heard. In a ‘thief’s tongue,’ the impoverished professional code of *mapanja/mapancha* (translation: pickpockets) calls out the audience who holds the (cultural) currency.

This tense dismantling of hegemonic power quickly deflates in a moment of humor and wordplay. In a self-reflexive wink to the audience and a nod towards ‘it knows it shows,’ the STREET BOY rebounds immediately from his near death experience to (deliberately) confuse the English word ‘hug’ with the Sheng word ‘haga’ (translation: buttocks).

Sheng regains its reputation as one that devolves into vulgarity as the STREET BOY compliments and tries to ‘hug’ one of the female character’s behinds. The audience erupted in laughter. For me, it was the first time I understood the joke in real time. For them, it may have been less perhaps about the sexual innuendo and more about relief for order restored. Performatively, Sheng eventually showed its true colors. The stigmatized code hadn’t *really* evolved. Just a temporary overturning; nothing to worry about. Yet, the ghosting remained as this ‘in-between-code’ appeared and for an ephemeral moment spoke volumes. The humor also served another function. This was the first validation that the outsiders-looking-in found the moment not only humorous but had relevance beyond the protected insider membership the student-artists and I had tenuously created together in rehearsal. For a sliver of a moment, in public view, I became part of the ‘we.’

The second example is the spoken word segment. Delivered forcefully in Sheng, the student-artists both taunt audiences for not understanding their exclusionary tongue and chide them for not taking it and the conditions it hails from more seriously. The performed movement phrase the ensemble created through Viewpoints was an inside/outside maze with no exit. Coupled with the rhythmic spoken words conveying Kenyan youth’s empty agency, it symbolized being choked (off) by the ‘knots’ of corruption:

ALL: Vijanaa

MEN: kuna vitu tunafaa kuwa tumenote

DENIS: hii nchi ina shida ya noti,
OJ: kitu funny wanasiasa hawajai note,

SILAS: ju wao na corruption walitie a knot.

SILAS: Nashangaa kwenye moody awori alienda

OJ: Please njoo uone mood ya hawa wanasiasa na hawaworry

DENIS: kazi ni kunona na kuendesha magari,

DENIS: kazi yetu wananchi ni kuamua nani atanona the next

ALL: THE NEXT FIVE

JOHN (*ENTERING*): alafu tunaenda kuendesha kwa choo.

DENIS: natumia language yetu, ndo nifikishe message kwetu, Wasifanye tuunde matroop, ju hizo ndo vitu zinafanya country itriip.

DENIS (*others* overlap) Najua nikitumia Sheng hamradi,

mtaomba hata nipigwe na radi,

SILAS: ni same thing na pesa za miradi,

ALL: vile zi hupotea si vijanaa haturadi.

[*Translation:*

ALL: We as the Youth

MEN: There are a few things we should note

DENIS: This country has economic problems

OJ: Funny thing is that politicians have no idea

SILAS: because them and corruption tied a knot.

SILAS: Where did Moody Awori go?

OJ: Please coz the politician's mood is worrying

DENIS: their work is getting them fat with fast cars

DENIS: and our work as citizens is to choose who gets fat next

ALL: THE NEXT FIVE

JOHN (*ENTERING*): while our health gets worse.

DENIS: I'm using *my* language, to get my message across, to avoid any civil wars, coz they bring countries down.

DENIS (*others* overlap) I know you don't understand Sheng, you even pray I get struck by lightning,

SILAS: same thing with public funds,

ALL: they get embezzled and we the youth *have no clue.*]

This piece gestures to the tensiveness of deliberate disaffiliation in its self-awareness and calls for stepping up, for moving forward, for transformation. No longer can one ignore, disown or disavow this 'illegitimate' tongue that through a metaphor of obfuscation keeps shouting a problem that won't go away. In a return to Reinelt's belief that theatre is a worksite for democracy, this dramatic moment carved open a transactional space for audience and

performer to be senders and receivers of novel signs, to see each other as engaged citizens and their roles for civic action anew. 'New ways of "knowing" [through theatre] is a "politics of perception," which also could be called an "aesthetic of responsibility...(or response-ability)"' (Reinelt 2014b: 43). In Kenya today, close to 80% of college graduates never find work in their fields. In this moment, the several youth on stage who were about to graduate represented a

devastating dilemma. They asked: *who is taking response-ability for us?*

ALL: All of us

FRIDAH: Are

BONNY: Kenyan

ESSY: Youth....

(beat)

OJ: All of us are students.

FIONA: All of us are worried about our futures.

SILAS: Some of us feel like we don't have a voice.

FRIDAH: Yet, all of us speak at least three languages--

BONNY: --fluidly. Loudly.

JOHN: Who is listening?

Lesson #4: Get Lost *and* Found in Translation

FRIDAH: Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote:

ESSY: Language is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history.

DENIS: But language

BONNY: Or languages

SILAS: And how we use them

FIONA: Not just written or spoken

OJ: But digital and visual too

JOHN: define not only who we were,

ESSY: but who we are,

DENIS: And who we hope to be

SILAS: Tomorrow.

ALL (overlapping): I am a Kenyan Youth.

BONNY: AND

DENIS: We

ESSY: are

ALL: Here.

(Overlap in Kiswahili, Kikuyu, Kamba, Sheng, Luo, based on the actor's language of choice and/or ancestry...)

BONNY: Tuko hapa! *(Swahili)*

ESSY AND FRIDAH: Twi gu ku. *(Kikuyu)*

JOHN AND FIONA: Twi paa. *(Kamba)*

DENIS AND SILAS: Tuko hapa hivii. *(Sheng)*

OJ: Wantie kae. *(Luo)*

ALL: WE ARE HERE!

Theatre is a productive worksite for communicative democracy; Reinelt reminds that systems of power aren't necessarily malicious or immutable:

...not all relations of power are unjust; not all terms of relation are non-negotiable. The identification of meaningful instances of these negotiations and the imagination of new possibilities for alternative arrangements can both critique the world-as-is and suggest a future world-as-might/should be... Indeed, theatre fully engaged in this imaginative task demonstrates the common grammar of politics and performance. (2014b: 43-44)

The concluding part of the performance, in which an actor ends with the beginning statement from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, represents a gained 'grammar of knowing'. A wisdom about the world as-is and could-be brings together languages and identity, past and present, a colonized history, and hope for the future. What gets asserted *here* is an undeniable and lived presence. The grammars of the fictive performance mirror a reality that finding one's place in the world is the only way these youth will survive. Presence for survival of a play and survival at play.

The late bell hooks warns this kind of 'taking place' in the real can be life-threatening and can many times, tragically, result in the fatal policing of marginalized bodies. 'Perhaps then it is "presence," the assertion of subjectivity

that colonizers do not want to see, that surfaces when the colonized express rage,' (1995: 12) But Michael Seward in 'Sovereign and Critical Grammars' sheds a different light on how one might see 'bodies of culture' speaking fearlessly in unison the last line of the play.¹⁵ WE ARE HERE. Seward (2014) would term this closing phrase of accumulated, multiple meanings 'a critical grammar' or utterance. He defines such as 'those which are deployed in the performative politics of actors who question, criticise [sic], or seek to transform the foundations, dominant understandings of sovereign or authoritative structures' (2014: 218). For my purposes, I will revise this idea of Seward's a small bit: not a critical but a *crucial* grammar for survival, like the STREET BOY's and GIDI's pleas. Seward continues. 'An assertion of *presence*, often an unsanctioned *presence*, can be *crucial*, not least as one way of asserting an uncharacteristic or unusual *visibility of a people...*' (2014: 218, my emphasis).

I wish *you* could *see* this moment. The student-actors move purposely and urgently across the stage, speaking at once, code-switching and overlapping through their multiple languages--not just Sheng, Swahili and English, but Luo, Kikuyu, and Kamba and the embodied vocabularies of Viewpoints-gesture, topography, space and time. A cacophony of sound and motion that resonates with dissonance just a moment before all of their black 'bodies of culture' arrest in a silent and still repose. *Beat*. With three words, they each claim their rightful time and place on that stage and in this world:

'Tuko hapa hivii.'

'We. Are. Here.'

CONCLUSION

Communicative democracy is 'a quest for unity...in which difference is valued and disagreement (dialogue) becomes a source of new knowledge' (as qtd. in May, 2007: 157). We are standing at a most precarious crossroads across the world. Those armed with the 'we-codes' of power and privilege need to shine the light of legitimacy on the 'they-codes,' so Kenyan youth and those they represent *can be seen*. Peering into the interstices of language, *here* are the worksites for democracy and citizenship-in-the making. *Here* we will learn wisdoms and hear other languages; *here* we will hear wisdoms and learn other languages. All of them.

This performance project created a new grammar of knowing; in this place, the student-artists became the teachers. They held the power of language at play, laboring for my understanding/knowledge/comprehension through constant acts of translation. A dismantling of power forged a performative language of civic action which worked to decolonize English and propel them and Sheng into positions of primacy. The owners of this marginalized code decided how to 'pay' and 'play' out knowledge making acts of translation a fluid resistance to power. They found welcoming agency within the gaps of historicized and hegemonic systems and this theatrical transaction-turned-outward carved a productive and democratizing performance space, lived in as seamlessly and gracefully as Kenyans move through the many languages that populate their daily lives. The rehearsal process and resulting performance brought new demarcations into the light from the 'in-between' and illuminated to audiences new potentials of who can own the politics of performance and how the politics of language and power can be performed.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For the entire exposé, see Wrong (2009). For more information on African Urban Youth Languages generally, and Sheng specifically, including the history of resistance to the linguistic code, please see Mazrui (1995), Ogechi (2007, 2008), Rudd (2018), and Samper (2004).
- 2 What will transpire over the next thirty pages could appear as an idealization of Sheng. And I do believe that as a conduit to decolonize both English and my position as a ‘power-full’ purveyor of it while at the same time democratizing and giving agency to student theatre artists through centering it in this performance project ultimately became an ‘ideal’ situation and outcome. But this is in no way dismisses or diminishes the problematic and potentially ambivalent codes of the language, especially in regards to its appropriation by young men to disparage women. This is discussed at length in P. Githinji (2008) focusing on objectifying women, and, among other sexist aspects of the language, the plethora of words for female body parts/genitalia and referring to acts of sexual intercourse that are ‘done’ to women rather than them having equal agency. I do not believe that the language itself is inherently misogynistic which comes from discussions about it with the student-actors. However, in looking at its complicated origins and that it initially evolved between men hustling on the streets of Eastlands, it would stand to reason that its evolution has leaned towards idealizing and reinforcing the male gender identity and heteronormativity as well as upholding unequal gender norms deeply embedded in Kenyan cultures. I would like to argue however that using theatre as a mode to re-present Sheng codes in different contexts, and altering those contexts to expose and deconstruct its misogynistic usage allowed for Kenyan youth generally and those who identify as women specifically to gain subjectivity through creating in and performing this reframing to an audience of their peers and larger community. It also gave Kenyan men a way to peer into the prism of Sheng’s use to communicate sexism and homophobia from a different angle. In this manner, the student-artists gained ‘control’ in a different public sphere over a language that due to its function in certain other contexts, especially the *matatu*/conductor culture, seems at times ‘out-of-their-control.’ This is well beyond the purview of this paper and my area of expertise, however, so please take these introductory statements with that in mind.
- 3 ‘Grammar’ is defined here as ‘the system and/or structure of a language’; whereas language can be taken literally, like the language of English, or metaphorically, like the languages (or grammars) of theatre and performance. I borrow the use of this term from Rai and Reinelt (2014). Grammar is also defined by Rai and Reinelt as a ‘set of recognizable rules or codifications that facilitate communication’ (2014: 2). Because this is a paper on a theatre performance about a language employed to subvert power systems, ‘grammars of performance and politics’ is apt and useful terminology.
- 4 Mathare is an informal settlement on the outskirts of Nairobi. On a Saturday, the streets would be filled with children, young people, families, and merchants engaged in the informal economies and ‘hustles’ of Kenya. Sheng would not only fulfill conditions of transactions but its usage would verify the access to and the agents of said commodities. That is to say, speaking in the Sheng that is particular to Mathare’s socio-economic region brings one ‘street cred’ and insider membership.
- 5 See explanation as to how Sheng qualifies as a ‘pidgin’ language in Mazrui (1995: 170-171).
- 6 I will discuss more in detail below how breaking the term ‘responsibility’ into

- 'response' and 'ability' works with Sheng as a language that can both 'respond to' and has the 'ability to' be an indigenous container/collective memory bank of a people's experience in history as does the art form of theatre.
- 7 This belief became an important framing line in the performance discussed later in the article.
 - 8 For more information on the differentiation between standard code English and linguistic code english, please see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2002: 8).
 - 9 All excerpts included with character names are lines from the original script and performance presented at the Kenyan Youth Language Practices conference held on 19-20 June 2018 at Kenyatta University. The conference was co-sponsored by the Linguistics department and the Center for African Studies. The original script, *Renda y Prof*, was written and performed by Kenyatta University students Esther Gicheru, Julius Omondi, Denis Ndungu, Fridah Karuri, John Kabaya, Fiona Nzambi, and Silas Kipruto.
 - 10 Resmaa Menakem (2017, 2020a) replaces the term 'people of color' with 'bodies of culture' as he believes this also replaces humanness back into the euphemism. Trauma and experiences of one's culture mark themselves indelibly and epigenetically on the body. Menakem hopes to call a larger attention to these ongoing conditions rather than delimiting one's experience 'just' to a racialized category. The exchange (2020a) went as follows: 'Menakem: Well, I don't say bodies of "color" anymore, because what I'm trying to do is, I'm trying to reclaim the idea that I'm actually human. Tippet: So you're saying that you're formed by the culture-- Menakem: Bodies of culture. That's right.'
 - 11 Menakem (2020b) from an interview with Krista Tippet and Robin DiAngelo, July 9, 2020. <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-diangelo-and-resmaa-menakem-in-conversation/>
 - 12 There is much to discuss about the performance itself: its presentation at an academic linguistics conference and the subsequent audience response, which essentially gave me affirmation beyond the 'we-codes' as to what 'worked.' However, that is not the scope of this particular essay. I will address two key scenes in this paper that relate to the overall argument on how an unstable code destabilized power systems and made room to empower and legitimize Kenyan youth voices.
 - 13 I borrow this linguistic term 'code-in-between' from Ogechi (2007, 2008) and metaphorically reshape it to describe a 'tesseract' type fifth-dimension of time and space termed by novelist Madeleine L'Engle (1962) in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Anne Bogart, internationally acclaimed theatre practitioner, borrows the concept to describe a non-logical leap between time and space that opens up during the ephemeral lived-ness of activated performances. For more, please see Ogechi (2007) 'Building Bridges Through Trichotomous Youth Identities in Kenya: Evidence from Code Choice,' (2008) 'Sheng as a Youth Identity Marker: Reality or Misconception' and Anne Bogart and Tina Landau (2005) *The Viewpoints Book*.
 - 14 'Street kid' is the character name used in the original script.
 - 15 Resmaa Menakem's term defined previously.

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