

**“L’illusion, c’est moi/La folie, c’est moi”  
 (“I am Illusion/I am Madness”):  
Madness, Merging and the Articulation of Universal Female  
Suffering in Calixthe Beyala’s *Tu t’appelleras Tanga***

by

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**Abstract**

In Beyala’s 1988 novel, *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*, both protagonists have been imprisoned as a result of their “subversive actions” and both are arguably “mad.” In this project, I argue that as a result of their varying forms of madness and hybrid identities, both Anna-Claude and Tanga resist normative female constructions of identity, and are thus unclassifiable according to the systems of categorization that would permit them to be part of both French and African societies. Beyala’s depiction of these two women (who eventually become one) aims to articulate a universal condition of female suffering, transgressing “fixed” notions of race, sexuality, and gender in both African and European discourses. A surrealist understanding of universalism as a multiplicity of individual voices is a particularly apt ideology for describing the “merged” state in which Tanga and Anna-Claude find themselves at the end of the novel. Therefore, using André Breton’s surrealist description of *folie* (madness) as a general framework for my discussion, I will examine how the states of “productive *folie*” and hybrid identities inhabited by Tanga and Anna-Claude lead to the articulation of universal female suffering that resists totalizing French and African identitarian discourses.

Cameroonian author, Calixthe Beyala, is known for her commitment to racial and gender politics as well as for her depictions of graphic sexual and psychological violence inflicted on and caused by her female protagonists. Working within this specifically postcolonial framework, she is not only one of the most prolific francophone African diasporic writers of our time, but also one of the most controversial. As a result of her constantly evolving style and the complexity of her female characters, Beyala is an author who consistently upsets fixed literary and authorial categorizations. Similar to the ways in which Beyala's novels transgresses certain aesthetic boundaries, her protagonists surpass the restrictions imposed by hegemonic discourses of femininity in both French and African contexts. In her 1988 novel, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (*Your Name Shall Be Tanga*), Beyala writes about transgression of both physical and ideological spaces as a commentary on power structures and female agency in Western and African phallographic societies.

The story opens with a conversation between Tanga, an African woman and former prostitute and Anna-Claude, a Belgian woman who has recently arrived in the unnamed African colony after leaving her job as a philosophy teacher in Paris. This dialogue takes place in their shared prison cell; Tanga is on the brink of death and Anna-Claude has been badly beaten by the prison guards. Both have been imprisoned as a result of their "subversive actions" and both are arguably "mad."<sup>1</sup> In this project, I contend that each is imprisoned not only as a result of actions that transgress certain social norms, but also on account of her identity that cannot be categorized within the stringent female identitarian codes of both France and Africa. As a result of their varying forms of madness and hybrid identities, both Anna-Claude and Tanga resist normative female constructions of identity, and are thus unclassifiable according to the systems of categorization (both Western and African) that would permit them to be part of society. Moreover, Beyala's description of the merging of these two women articulates a universal condition of female suffering that transgresses the boundaries of "fixed" notions of race, sexuality, and gender in both African and European discourses.

Similar to Beyala's project in *Tanga*, André Breton and the French surrealists sought to upset fixed European categories of gender, racial, and sexual identities and abandoned the use of rational thought in expressing social conditions and political realities. The surrealists expressed the sense of cultural and political fragmentation they observed in daily social interactions through automatic writing, discontinuous narratives, and textual/visual collage or pastiche. Though the Surrealist aesthetic favored fragmentation and irresolution, surrealist theory primarily focused on unification through individual articulations of universal conditions. Surrealism lamented the fragmented reality caused by various social phenomena (such as colonialism) and sought to provide solutions, thus upholding the ideal that art provides the unity needed by mankind that has been eschewed by modern life.

For these reasons, Surrealism is useful for projects of postcolonial identity articulation that address the irrational and the crossing of institutionally established boundaries, such as Beyala's *Tanga*. Though Calixthe Beyala does not subscribe specifically to a "neo-surrealist" aesthetic and instead tends to resist stylistic categorization, I find a surrealist reading of her text appropriate and elucidating given the prominent theme of unification in her work. Using André Breton's, surrealist descriptions of *folie* (madness) and universalism as a general framework for my discussion, I will examine how the states of "productive *folie*" and hybrid identities inhabited by Beyala's protagonists, Tanga and Anna-Claude, lead to the articulation of universal female understandings of suffering and subjugation.

Considering the fact that in the postcolonial context the concept of the "universal" has taken on myriad (and mostly negative) associations, I will take a moment to address how I use the term in this project. Commonly accepted definitions of European (specifically French) forms of universalism require individuals to adapt in order to fit into the framework of a specific and predefined construct. To root this notion historically, French universalism was one of the driving ideologies behind France's colonial *mission civilatrice*, a practice that began early in the seventeenth century. During their colonial encounters, the French sought to transform "the savage" into a Frenchman by way of an intense process of identity upheaval. In keeping with this tradition, twentieth and twenty-first century French notions of universalism are premised on idea that anyone can become French, so long as they are willing to subscribe to the specific philosophies and ideologies that make up the French nation. Therefore in the contemporary context, it is possible for a Muslim to become French if she sheds her headscarf, speaks French without an accent, and refrains from any overt religious activity that would mark her as "Other" (such as keeping halal, praying in public spaces, etc.). As a result of these stringent guidelines (which, in their most extreme form require a denial of the self and all previous cultural affiliations), miscegenation, hybridity and multiculturalism (all contained in the French term *métissage*) have been at the center of many debates and continue to raise questions on the social, political, cultural, artistic and literary scenes. This extreme European form of universalism is not the notion I envision in this project. Following the writings of French surrealist author, André Breton, I subscribe to a surrealist understanding of universalism that allows for a multiplicity of voices and identities in constant evolution. As Michael Richardson affirms:

*Surrealist universalism is not monolithic. In Surrealism, the universal is conceived in a multiplicity of forms. Within this relation, specific cultural identities are constantly being formed as part of a complex mosaic that makes up any human being. For it should go without saying that all cultural traditions are hybrid, bringing together disparate elements to form an unstable whole, one that necessarily disintegrates under close analysis (84).*

This understanding of the universal as a multiplicity of individual voices is a particularly apt ideology for describing the “telling” process that leads to Tanga and Anna-Claude’s “merging” at the end of the novel. According to this understanding, the “merged” universal narrative created by Anna-Claude and Tanga is not totalizing or exclusive. Rather, it is representative of a multiplicity of female diasporic voices from different generations; individual constituents brought together to comprise a surrealist universal mosaic. Contained in this universal narrative is also the possibility for evolution. During their extended conversation, Tanga shares stories of other Black and White women who exist in states of suffering or madness as the result of violence, economic hardship or various forms of exploitation. It is only through their dialogue and eventual merging that both women are able to come to this universal articulation. Until this process of “telling” begins, both women are bound up in their own conceptions of suffering. Tanga is limited as a result of her personal notions regarding race and opportunity. When Tanga recounts her interactions with a White prostitute, Camilla, who had lived many of the same physical hardships and maternal anxieties as Tanga herself, she insists on labeling Camilla as Anna-Claude’s sister. Though she wants to merge with Anna-Claude in order to live on to tell her story, Tanga continues to resist this universalism by separating the two women based on their biological differences. It is not until Anna-Claude insists on the fact “blood is neither black nor white, it is quite simply red,” that Tanga realizes the magnitude of this shared narrative of suffering (63). Through their merging, they create a new type of universal woman; one who exists outside the boundaries of race and culture.

One of the productive forces behind the articulation of this universal solidarity is Tanga and Anna-Claude’s shared madness. As scholars of francophone literature such as Valérie Orlando have examined, states of madness and nervous depression manifest when women are “pushed to the edge, marginalized in the outside realms of what is considered ‘normal’ by their respective societies” (Orlando, x). Before meeting in the prison cell (the ultimate site of marginality), both Tanga and Anna-Claude already exist on the peripheries of their respective societies. In addition, both have been rejected by societies that give them limited choices regarding female behavior, appearance, and thought. Reflecting on European female authorship in the nineteenth century, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s observations also apply to twentieth century postcolonial literatures (thus reinforcing the universal aspect of women’s writing across geographical and temporal boundaries): “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (55). As a result of their unconventional lives (at times chosen, at times imposed), Anna-Claude and Tanga are thus excluded and regarded as “monstrous” entities. Perhaps the most prominent monstrosity is each woman’s psychological “shortcomings.” The states of madness Anna-Claude and Tanga inhabit result from the irreconcilability of external and internal definitions of identity. If identity is directly related to the choices one is able to make, or the agency one maintains in his or her daily existence, then factors which curtail this autonomy could lead to a loss of self or state of *folie*.

An example of these external factors could include masculine power (or domination), exemplified in *Tanga* by Tanga's parents, male clients, and lover. In addition, the French and African social expectations of purity and conformity unmet by Anna-Claude fit into the category of external definition. As psychologist and specialist on insanity, Thomas Szasz, indicates:

*A person's ability to make uncoerced choices is contingent on his internal and external conditions. His internal conditions, that is, his character, personality or "mind"- comprising his aspirations and desires as well as his aversions and self-discipline- propel him toward, and restrain him from, various actions. His external conditions, that is, his biological makeup and his physical and social environment- comprising the capabilities of his body, and the climate, culture, laws, and technology of his society- stimulate him to act in others...(1).*

When the internal and external is out of balance, madness occurs. At times, this is the result of the environment (or a set of externally imposed definitions) in which the protagonists find themselves. At others, it is the result of attempting to come to terms with an irreconcilable state of unbelonging<sup>2</sup>. However, for both Anna-Claude and Tanga, this state of madness is productive in that it leads each woman to an acute understanding of the suffering and anxieties that plague diasporic women from different races and cultural backgrounds.

The interplay between the external and internal forces that create and remedy madness serves a unique purpose in the process of identity formation and reconciliation. Returning to surrealist thought, Breton believed this interplay was essential to the surrealist project of more fully comprehending the subconscious. In a 1934 address entitled "Qu'est-ce le que le surréalisme?" ("What is Surrealism?") Breton comments on the movement's attempts to merge the interior and the exterior and the importance of reciprocity in this encounter:

*This final unification [of interior and exterior reality] is the supreme aim of surrealism: interior reality and exterior reality being, in the present form of society, in contradiction (and in this contradiction we see the very cause of man's unhappiness, but also the source of his movement), we have assigned to ourselves the task of confronting these two realities with one another on every possible occasion, of refusing to allow the preeminence of the one over the other...but one after the other...allowing us to observe their reciprocal attraction and interpenetration and to give to this interplay of forces all the extension necessary for the trend of these two adjoining realities to become one and the same thing (4).*

Surrealism's concern with the unification of the interior and the exterior resonates with Tanga and Anna-Claude's shared process of negotiating the psychological landmines of memory while in their prison cell. As Breton indicates, the dialogue between interior and exterior elements permits one to move toward a unified whole. In the same way, I read Tanga and Anna-Claude's dialogues as representative of a process of identity unification or resolution that has not yet been achieved, but remains the eventual goal.

In line with surrealist thinking, rather than focusing on the debilitating effects of madness, I interpret these specifically feminine expressions of postcolonial *folie* through a productive, surrealist lens. Thus, I have coined the term "productive *folie*," as a way to discuss the possibilities to be found in female madness. In *Tanga*, the *folie* experienced by each protagonist is useful for revealing truths and articulating female solidarities across boundaries. After all, the "irrational" knows no race or status. To elaborate on the identitarian possibilities to be found in states of madness, I turn again to Surrealism, particularly Breton's examination of mental illness in *Nadja*. Convinced that there was truth to be found in *la folie*, Breton was particularly fascinated by the constantly shifting identities and reference points of the schizophrenic mind. In *Nadja*, Breton claims there are certain truths that only the mentally ill can elucidate. *Nadja* (meaning "truth" in Russian) is a schizophrenic who becomes the personification of Surrealism for Breton. He looks to her as a sort of mentor; someone who teaches him to "live surreal." Given the nature of her illness, *Nadja*'s "reality" is constantly in flux. She is unable to repress thoughts and emotions as they pass through her. Her very being subverts logic and demonstrates the possibilities of free subconscious association in both artistic and experiential realms. Similar to Anna-Claude and Tanga, *Nadja*'s identity resists rational systems of categorization. Instead of viewing madness as limiting or detrimental, Breton privileges the state of *folie* as one of truth and possibility. In the context of this project, perhaps the most important thing we can take away from Breton's writings on insanity is his trust in *la folie* as an accurate depiction (or truth), rather than a dismissal or fear of exaggerated or hybrid (read: subversive) states of being.

Tanga's madness is revealed through her storytelling, a practice on which she insists in order to accomplish the eventual goal of merging the women's two identities. During her stories, Tanga refers to herself as *femme-fillette* (which translates roughly to "woman-girlchild"). Tanga's self-definition as *femme-fillette* is a hybrid construction that does not fit into what women are expected to be in her cultural context. Ironically, this particular hybrid identity was in fact created by societal systems of domination, the result of forced sexual exploitation by Tanga's mother, her clients, and even her "lover." As Tanga explains to Anna-Claude, in her country, a child is born an adult who is responsible for his or her parents. Thus, this hybrid identity results from the irreconcilability of her age (sixteen years old at the time of imprisonment) with the imposed social expectations of women (and children).

Anna-Claude replies that these societal expectations are not normal, and angrily adds that the adults in this country who establish such practices must be mad. This pivotal interaction underscores the notion that madness may be the only “logical” response to such a social system. Thus, Tanga’s madness (stemming from her hybrid state) is useful in that it allows her to survive until she can at last fulfill her goal of merging with Anna-Claude. Though at first glance Anna-Claude does not appear to be a hybrid character, upon closer analysis it becomes clear that her identity is complex and “tainted” for a number of reasons. As indicated by Tanga early in their dialogue, as a European woman, Anna-Claude is racially classifiable within the confines of both French and African social discourses. However, her identity is still “impure” as a result of her psychiatric problems (madness) and her insistence on transgressing established social boundaries by moving to Africa. In addition, she is in a “mixed” (albeit imaginary) relationship with an African man, which renders her even more “Other” in the eyes of her students and friends. Furthermore, her actions in the un-named African colony, including attempts to uncover the truth regarding the disappearance of her students, mark her as a seditious (read: impure) element.

Hybridity, Bhabha argues, subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. The carefully constructed inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are disrupted by the hybrid subject’s uncomfortable entry into mainstream discourse. Thus, the dominant culture becomes contaminated by the linguistic and racial differences of the new and “Other” component. In light of Bhabha’s discussion, the representations of states of hybridity in Beyala’s novel could be viewed as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and its exclusion of “Other(ed)” narratives. To control this subversive hybrid element, the dominant culture must first classify it according to its own cultural codes. Thus, the hybrid individual’s resistance to classification is powerful in that it consistently upsets these fixed categories. Tanga and Anna-Claude’s hybrid (and thus inherently subversive) identities render them unclassifiable by the dominant systems in which they reside. Due to their “unruly,” behaviors, neither is allowed to fully integrate into the African context. Both are forcefully excluded and quarantined to maintain social order. Unable to fit into society, both women retreat into themselves, creating their own fantasy worlds that eventually push them into states of madness. This cycle is broken by their dialogue in the prison cell, eventually leading to a metaphysical merging of the self(ves). Tanga’s personal narrative weaves in and out of reality, incorporating dreams, fantasies, and nightmarish vignettes and shifting between scenes in a free-associative manner. Through their stories, we discover that both Tanga and Anna-Claude exist on the brink of fantasy, a survival mechanism each has developed to cope with her horrific reality. This storytelling, requisite for the merging Tanga desires, allows both women the freedom to continue to transgress the rigid spatial and ideological structures imposed by the logic of society in a productive manner.

As Irène Assiba d'Almeida comments: "The act of telling produces extraordinary results in the novel. It brings forth life, liberates, restores sanity, and ensures immortality" (73-74). The telling permits their identities to assimilate and become one, thus allowing the narratives of the many women in the novel to live on. Unlike the French definition of *assimilation*, which requires the outsider to conform to the aforementioned universal French identity, the assimilation experienced by Tanga and Anna-Claude is inclusive and thus subversive. As Françoise Lionnet discusses, assimilation takes on a much different meaning in "border zones,"<sup>3</sup> or spaces where cultures meet. Here, the merging of diverse cultural elements does not necessarily signify an erasure of one culture or trait; rather all elements involved in the assimilation process are transformed by the encounter. In their shared cell, Tanga and Anna-Claude exist in a type of "border zone," removed from their unique cultural contexts. Unable to assimilate into their respective cultures, they are forced into this, to use Bhabha's term, "liminal" space that is isolated, but full of possibility. Through their merging they gain power, and these previously "'inferior' or subaltern elements contribute to the evolution and transformation of the hegemonic system by producing resistances and counter discourses" (Lionnet 9). The creation of this universal narrative is powerful in that it allows for previously unheard stories of suffering to be told. In addition, the rationally unclassifiable "merged self" that is Tanga and Anna-Claude at the end of the novel resists naming, and further transgresses social systems of classification.

The eventual merging of Tanga and Anna-Claude demonstrates the ways in which the truths revealed by states of *folie* or disorder lead to a fuller understanding and more accurate articulation of the universal postcolonial problems that plague women. In addition to revealing a level of authenticity that is not possible to articulate in logical (or conventional) ways, the protagonists are also allowed more agency in a society that believes they should be silenced. Relegated to the margins of society, Tanga and Anna-Claude use the isolated, controlled space of the prison cell as a staging ground for their ultimate act of subversion, the merging that allows for these women's stories to live on. Tanga's fragmented self lodges itself in Anna-Claude's body. However, Anna-Claude's psyche is still intact, thus producing a complete psychic merging of the two women. In this way, the knowledge contained in each is merged into one tale of suffering that defies Cartesian categories of race, geography, and history. In addition to upsetting rational social categories and understandings of self and body, this revolutionary merging is also the ultimate act of liberation. As Bethany Latimer writes in an article on Madness and Breton: "Although for most modern revolutionaries, the term 'revolution' necessarily suggests collective action, which finds its origin in the subsuming of individual concerns to those of the group, Surrealism was unique in that it consistently identified the starting point of social change with the liberation of the individual psyche" (176).

Like her protagonists, Calixthe Beyala is a complex, revolutionary storyteller who resists normative or imposed literary constructs. By pushing stylistic boundaries and challenging the prescribed categorizations of both African and European narratives, Beyala allows for a multiplicity of individual female voices to live on through her novels.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the European context, the term “madness” is used to describe what in American discourse would be referred to as “mental illness” or “insanity.” It is interesting to note that in modern European societies, knowledge was historically equated with science, which was rational, productive, and orderly (attributes traditionally associated with men). This category contrasted sharply with the narrative, which was viewed as primitive, irrational, and at times “mad” (qualities traditionally associated with women). My particular readings of madness in postcolonial European and African women’s narratives has been informed by Shoshana Felman’s La folie et la chose littéraire (Paris: Seuil, 1978) and Valérie Orlando’s Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood Through Madness in Francophone Women’s Writing of Africa and the Caribbean (New York: Lexington Books, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> As discussed by Salman Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands (New York: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Renato Rosaldo’s term in “Ideology, Place, and People without Culture,” Cultural Anthropology 3 (February 1988): 85.

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